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# FOLKLORE AND QUEST FOR JUSTICE

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Edited by

Felix Wilfred

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## Folklore and Quest for Justice

Edited by

Felix Wilfred

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J. B. Chethimattam

**THIS ISSUE OF JEEVADHARA**

**IS DEDICATED**

**TO THE MEMORY OF**

**SEBASTIAN KAPPEN**

**AN ORIGINAL AND INTREPID THINKER**

**WHO NURTURED JEEVADHARA IN ITS INFANCY**

**WITH HIS SUBSTANTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS**

**AND STOOD FOR ITS CAUSE**

**UNTIL THE END OF HIS LIFE (1993).**

**J. CONSTANTINE MANAEL**

**General Editor**



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## Editorial

The awakening and rising of the marginalized castes and classes has given today sharp teeth to the quest for justice in our society. The achieving of a more humane and egalitarian society requires the confluence of many forces. There is need, for example, of a different perspective, framework and approach to this basic human issue of justice. For, the dominant paradigm of justice and the instruments to achieve it appear to be very Western in their origin, spirit and inspiration.

Take, for example, the case of our Constitution. Freedom of thought, belief and expression, the right to own property etc., find prominent place in the Preamble as enforceable fundamental rights. But strangely, matters most crucial to the poor and oppressed of this country, like the right to have means of sustenance, basic education, removal of social inequality etc. are placed among the non-enforceable directive principles of the state policy. Does not this, perhaps, reflect the Western moorings of the framers of the Constitution?

In any case, there is urgent need to approach today the issue of justice with our social history, culture, categories as the frame of reference. It is this conviction which prompted me to plan the current issue of *Jeevadhara* for exploring an approach to social justice through Indian folklore and the insights and challenges it presents.

Folklore, as the prevalent general impression would have it, is not something simple or something light and meant solely for entertainment. It is so complex that defining it is as difficult as defining culture. Even more difficult it is to establish the relationship between culture and folklore, since the latter is inextricably related to the former and possesses its own autonomous character as well.

By way of introduction, let me present here just a brief general description. The 'lore' in folk-lore refers basically to the expressive forms of the people — *verbal* (folk stories, folk songs, ballads, proverbs, riddles, aphorisms etc.) and *non-verbal* (folk art, folk festivals, folk dance etc.).

By *folk* is meant the marginalized and oppressed people in our society, most of whom live in rural areas, with their own



expressive forms — folklore — which embody their life-pattern, self-perceptions and their interpretation of the world and society. By this I keep my distance from the position of folklorists like Alan Dundes for whom folk would be a neutral term and folklore is the expressive forms of any group provided they have at least one factor in common. If so, this would mean that all clerics, because they have something in common, will have their own folklore; so too landlords, moneylenders, politicians and goondas. No, by folk I mean the marginalized and oppressed and not any group, and it is the sense of justice that emerges from their experiences as revealed in their folklore forms that constitutes the theme of this number of *Jeevadhara*. This does not mean that the creation and expression of the folk is a closed entity without relationship to the classical. The relationship is complex as will be clear from the various contributions.

Folklore has a strong communitarian character, for, these expressive forms of the people originate and are nurtured in a community and the performance of these forms reinforces and builds up the community. That explains why most folk forms have no individual authorship. They are anonymous and exist as the collective creation of a people. Folklore forms (except those non-verbal like dance and art) are characterized also by their oral tradition and transmission. The various folklore forms, as tradition orally transmitted, are very much contextualized in their form, meaning and performance. They are as much a past tradition as a present reality. Therefore to speak of folklore is not a pursuit in retrieving a bygone past. Folklore is in a way a window that opens up a world of peoples' emotions, beliefs, their social interactions. No wonder, that it can be studied from various points of view — anthropological, literary, theoretical, social, psychological, psychoanalytical etc.

The contributions in this issue try to explore a few forms of folklore and highlight the sense of justice embedded in them. The final article concludes the issue by exploring the challenges folklore presents to a theology that is oriented towards the achievement of social justice for the downtrodden and marginalized.

There is no pretension of comprehensiveness. The articles presented here want to be no more than simply examples and an invitation to the readers to enter more deeply into this vast field.

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Felix Wilfred



## Punishments and Quest for Justice in Folk Life-Patterns

The author contrasts the modern legal system and jurisprudence with the patterns of justice and punishment in the folk traditions. Whereas the former, under the influence of contemporary general homogenization trend, metes out uniform patterns of punishment with little respect for cultural diversity in the conception and practice of justice, the latter contains some very important values and dimensions. The author shows that folk patterns contain an in-built psychological mechanism to release the pent-up feelings in the guilty, a strong sense of community in justice and in punishment (in contrast to modern isolation of prisons), and very meaningful modes of reconciliation such as commensalism. Besides, there is a strong sense of the Divine as illustrated by the practice of oaths among the folk. He deplores that these alternative folk patterns of justice in the context of life are threatened today by institutional and mechanistic patterns.

Across a wide range of cultures, the systems of disputes, resolving of disputes, justice and punishment have been functioning within the framework of their own culture, in which law and other political processes are ensembled together on the basis of their cultural conceptions or 'total social fact'. The historical transformation from primitiveness to "civilization" has yielded the so-called rationality, and the present "homogenization" process of cultures around the world tends to present the modern European jurisprudence as the unitary model which implies that this system is the "model" for the rest of the systems.

The most obvious sense may be seen that the "civilizing process" or the present "homogenization process" seems to delink the cultural considerations regarding the security or the need for deterrence. Though the modern penal system has ameliorated the nature of punishment, the fundamental instinctual drives, more particularly the aggressions inflicted on the victims of the judgement or other forms of pressures developed in the

guilty will remain there. Both Freud<sup>1</sup> and Elias<sup>2</sup> insist that the repressed instincts and unconscious wishes continue to exist and to express themselves. In this context, rationalizing or ameliorating the punishments does not leave the offenders free from other pressures. Though rationality relieves the physical or corporal punishment on the one hand, it indirectly sets up the psychological pressures on the other hand. In other words, the virtual disappearance of corporal punishment has been replaced by more abstract forms of suffering, such as the deprivation of liberty or the total loss of financial resources. Now it is the task to validate these two ends. It has been often held that the "civilizing process" has brought greater rationality into the penal process, but it is not clear how the rational process can account for the conflict within the individual between instinctual desires and internalized super-ego controls, a conflict which has profound consequences in psychological as well as social life.

Garland<sup>3</sup> accentuates that "social meaning of punishment is badly understood and needs to be explored if we are to discover ways of punishing which better accord with our social ideals. To this end it constructs what is, in effect, a sociology of legal punishment, drawing upon the work of social theorists and historians who have tried to explain punishment's historical foundations, its social role, and its cultural significance"<sup>4</sup>. As Garland identifies the need for the re-exploration of the social meaning of punishment, there is an equal need of reconsidering the issues regarding the upcoming of "unitary model" of the modern European penal system through the process of homogenization of cultures across the world. In contrast to this, there are alternative systems which still exist and function. The present inquiry sets out not just to present one of the alternative systems of justice and punishment, but also to endeavour to open up new lines of inquiry and to explore the "specificity" of these systems, and their complexity of function, richness of meaning and cultural significance. This paper more

1 S. Freud, "Criminality from a sense of Guilt", in Riviere (ed.) *Some Character-Types Met within Psycho-Analytical Work*, Collected Papers, N. Y., 59.

2 N. Elias, *The Civilizing Process. i, The History of Manners*, Oxford 1978 (1989).

3 D. Garland, *Punishment and Modern Society*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1990.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 1.



precisely speaks of the contemporary folk punishments and quest for justice taking the South Indian data in general and folk communities of Tamil region in particular.

### Cultural forms of folk political process

As in modern jurisprudence, the folk political process is also a process of focusing power over public goals. The enforcing authority is widely diversified in nature, from an informal headman or leader to a formal adjudicating council. Based on its functions it is called by different names like sub-caste/caste panchayats or village panchayats.

We are concerned directly with the foundation on which the folk punishments are conceived and developed. The folk "customary laws" which stipulate the wide range of punishments are framed in languages, discourses and sign systems which embody specific cultural meanings, distinctions and sentiments. Their motivations and cultural meanings are intelligible only in terms of cultural conceptions. I draw here on some comparative data: "In northern India, calling another person in a lighter vein by the term *sala* is considered a joke. But if the same term is spoken seriously it will lead to a quarrel. In the south, addressing a stranger of equal rank in the singular will lead to conflict. In a village in Mysore district two women were quarreling over the ownership of a small lump of cowdung. A man passing by intervened by saying to one of the women that she should not quarrel and abuse so much. She was infuriated and asked him to mind his own business and go his way, failing which she would beat him with a broom. Even a threat to be beaten with broom is polluting and degrading. The matter was reported to the village council. The woman was found guilty and fined Rs. 25, of which Rs. 10 were given to the man"<sup>5</sup>. Among Kamballattu Nāyakkars in Tamil Nadu (a nomadic group) even exchanging such words as broomstick, slipper etc., will be considered as pollution, and the offender will be fined<sup>6</sup>.

5 P. K. Misra, "Folk Communication—sophisticated media and the simple man", *SAP*, No. 11 (1974); cfr also ID., *System of Dispute Resolution in Indian Society: An Anthropological Perspective*, Tamil University, Thanjavur (n. d.); B. S. Cohn, "Anthropological Notes on Disputes and Law in India", *American Anthropologist*, 67, 2 (1965), part 2; W. G. Archer, *Tribal Law and Justice*, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, 1984.

6 Cfr S. Bhakthavatsala Bharathi, *A Study of a Nomadic Community in Tamil Nadu: Kamballattu Nayakkars*. (manuscript).

Punishment, then, can be viewed as a complex cultural artefact, encoding concern for conformity to community values. This is the primary foundation of folk justice and punishment.

Folk mechanisms for maintaining cohesiveness could simply be described as resolving conflict. However, we will here limit our discussion to several institutionalized means for resolving conflict. The folk "dual" or other "disputes" illustrate some important points. The ways of resolution of disputes allow the expression of pent-up frustrations and anger in front of the panchayat meeting itself. The public watch the whole thing. So the "letting out" of all feelings in front of the whole gathering relieves the disputants of anger and other negative feelings. Relieving all psychological pressures in front of the public not only alleviates the trouble between the two disputed individuals, but brings them explicitly to reaffirm the shared norms and values of their community.

Folk justice is a public issue. During the proceedings of the panchayat everyone publicly agrees what is correct and what is not correct. Here, settling the disputes is a public affair. Besides the council members, the participants can be involved in the dispute resolution. On the contrary, in the state legal system, the entire discourse is defined and limited to certain persons; the public cannot enter into the discourse. The outcome of anger and frustration cannot be expressed fully in this defined system. The judges and lawyers enforce the statutory "frame" and arrest the psychological pressures inside the court arena.

In the court arena the privatization of the offender seems to illumine a very important tendency in the history of punishment<sup>7</sup>. It has been an increasing phenomenon that punishment in modern penal system is rather an act of putting everything "behind the scenes" of social life. In contrast to medieval and early modern periods, the punishment of offenders is given now-a-days in special enclaves removed from the public view. The shift of the gallows from the public square to behind the prison walls is the shifting of the legal process from the "open discourse space" to a "closed space". This replacement from public spectacle to a closed institution leads the

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7 N. Elias, *The Civilizing Process. ii. State Formation and Civilization*, Oxford, 1982 (1939).



offender to live away from the social life. The offenders' life behind the high walls (prison) or reformatories explicitly makes them asocial. Even after the release from such cells they are stigmatized as persons who spent an asocial life for a lengthy period of time. As I have noted earlier, this leads to psychological pressures. The victim always tries to antagonize the offending individual. On many occasions, justice given by the statutory law or court kindles new antagonisms at different levels, which aggravate rather than resolve problems.

The folk pattern of resolving disputes is a system of conformity in itself, which tries to enable the guilty to enter into the normal status immediately, rather than to punish and expel the person in an asocial space. Hayden discerns a significant aspect of traditional Indian panchayat when he says that these panchayats are not analogous to 'courts'<sup>8</sup>. In village India, if a person commits a wrong act, he/she automatically gets polluted and the same panchayat restores his/her normal status after imposing a punishment. On the other hand, courts find out whether the person committed a violation of the statutory law and impose the prescribed punishment. Thus a guilty person is convicted by the court, while the panchayat tries to restore the person's normal status in the society<sup>9</sup>.

In the folk legal system, the guilty person who temporarily loses his/her normal status and is labelled as "polluted"; but upon the person's conformity by realizing the unethical act committed, he/she regains the "pure" status. "Purity-pollution" is the central conception around which the social, religious, economic and legal systems function.

The act of "ex-communication", the highest form of punishment in folk life style, will vividly explain the centrality of the purity-pollution conception. Among Kambalattu Nāyakkars the acts leading to *mayil* (highest form of pollution) are effectively controlled by evoking automatic ex-communication. *Mayil* eventually acts as an effective deterrent. In practice,

8 R. M. Hayden, "Excommunication as everyday event and ultimate sanction: The nature of suspension from an Indian Caste", *Journal of Asian Studies*, 42, 2 (1980).

9 P. K. Misra, Folk Communication—sophisticated media and the simple man", *art. cit.*, p. 2.

excommunication is the most powerful and the most serious punishment. However, conceptually the act of excommunication is very complex. Hayden has very aptly stated that the system of excommunication has not been adequately discussed in the anthropological studies of the panchayat<sup>10</sup>. His thesis is that, "excommunication which is caste suspension is not a punishment imposed by the caste either temporarily or permanently, nor is it usually a very rigorous ordeal for the person who is in that condition. It is an everyday automatic occurrence because pollution is always incurred by a person who violates the caste custom and therein lies the basis for an alternative concept of excommunication, not the act itself. Treating someone as being suspended from caste is a response to pollution, which must be seen as a state of nature, rather than the act of punishment".

Hayden has raised the complementarity of pollution and excommunication. The Kamballattu Nayakkar situation offers a vivid explanation of this phenomenon. A person declared *mayil* automatically stands away from all social interactions. The person and the family members are not invited for rituals, ceremonies or any other social gatherings. Exchange of goods, food or other transactions will lead to pollution. However, the degree of pollution ranges quite appreciably. While a *mayil* happens to observe any life-cycle rituals, his/her nearest relatives and affines cannot keep themselves away from the scene, and they take part in the occasion. After returning to their camp/village they pay a fine of three rupees and offer respect to the council of elders. This frees them from pollution.

### The hallmark of folk justice

Whatever may be the form of punishment, it is decided collectively. In most cases, the participating public is involved in the discourse. They can even demand minimizing the punishment. If the guilty person relents and admits the unethical act he/she has committed, then a lighter punishment is meted out. If the guilty is found rough and rigid, then heavier punishment is imposed. Thus the punishment is always situational and changeable. Hence the dispute resolution in these communities is a public affair; everyone has the right to be present, to participate in the discourse, and even to argue for the

10 R. M. Hayden, *art. cit.*, p. 12-13.

sanction of lighter punishment. Though the adjudicators occupy the chief position, the public involved in the proceedings can shape the final outcome. In this circumstance, the adjudicators are only formal announcers. There are many instances in which the whole assemblage (including the adjudicators) shares in the discourse and collectively decides the judgement, but the duty of the formal council is to enforce the judgement.

It is the hallmark of the folk legal system that it reconciles the disputants and facilitates a cordial relationship immediately after the panchayat proceedings are over. After resolving the dispute, the important members involved in the adjudication are treated to liquor or a feast or a simple toast, or, at the minimum, they share betel leaves and betel nuts. This shared act is initiated as part of the adjudication and thus it is explicit that *the primary aim of these folk tribunals is the restoration of good relations, not the punishment of an offender*. The host (either the guilty or both the guilty and the aggrieved persons) are really paid a compliment to forget the past and to reassert their confidence in improving cordial relations. For them, the act of commensalism is to restore the relationship rather than to punish. This practice of commensalism is sometimes continued as further reinforcing of social ties. Such a sharing of drink, food and other things is nearly a universal method of establishing solidarity.

### **Covert forms of social control**

As we have seen, the folk legal system is a process of focusing of power on public goals. Indeed, the process must be set in some context in which there is sufficient agreement on goals and ways to achieve them, so that the focusing of power can occur. In folk societies, the power exerted by the socially approved council on the people can be termed as overt forms of control. There are other mechanisms of social control which can be labeled as covert forms of control, through which people exert other means of "power" on the individual with whom they are in enmity.

Of the several kinds of covert forms of social control, witchcraft not only resolves conflict, but sometimes causes it as well. Witchcraft is common to most folk societies around the world. In the South Indian context, especially in the context

of Tamil region, by and large no one actually practises the craft; it is only suspected. Fear of being accused of witchcraft insures that many people abide by society's ethos, norms and values. Sometimes, in a real sense, witches do, in fact, exist. Similarly, in common parlance, one usually thinks of witchcraft as a source of disruption of social ties, but anthropologists seem to be convinced of its function in conflict resolution and maintenance of peace and social control.

Another widespread covert feature of folk social life, that acts very much like witchcraft is gossip. Actually, a number of mechanisms resemble witchcraft; the most common one is gossip. It is a powerful force for ensuring conformity.

The folk legal system and its process, in reality, present a cycle of conflict, conflict resolution, and maintenance of cohesiveness. On the contrary, the dominant homogenized legal process indicates a dichotomy between the occurrence of a series of conflicts on the one hand and resolving the conflict and making the social cohesiveness on the other. The folk legal pattern and its process are complex, and one cannot study the phenomenon in isolation from such questions as commensalism. In this interlinking, some of the factors that apparently cause conflict are also factors which contribute to the maintaining of the social order. In this sense, the covert forms acting one way or the other, initiate both social order and conflict. The conflict theorists suggest that these phenomena are essential to the existence of the social order.

Most folk disputes are settled by *oaths* which leave arbitration of the matter to the deities. A person taking a false oath in front of the deity will be punished severely. In some cases, the disputant places his/her hand on the head of his/her child or mother. In some other instances, they also take an oath by stepping over their child or holding a child in front of them. By doing so they equate the "descendancy of blood" or the "filial bond" as the source material for their oath. In other words, they themselves take up their "life" as the source of oath. The false oath will lead to terrible penalties, especially taking an oath in front of the deity or by keeping off the burning camphor (in Hindu conception fire is an archetypal symbol which denotes energy/life). The afore mentioned examples show how the folk



legal system, in one way or the other, is linked to religion. It imposes sanctions which influence conduct, and therefore, has ethical import. Thus, religious belief has been an important force in shaping the legal process and punishment in folk culture.

From the medieval period onwards, the Western legal system has increasingly separated itself from religious authorities and conceptions. The legal system in indigenous communities, instead, presents a vivid contrast to modern/European developments. The law of the indigenous communities ("customary law") developed by culture-specific conceptions with religious meaning in it, exhibits almost exactly the reverse of those modern laws in which rationality, secular thinking and 'civilizing' process have come into existence. Elias views these systems as follows: "The civilizing process describes and analyses the long-term historical process which resulted in the emergence of those distinctive cultural and psychic patterns which we call 'Western civilization'...In recent years, sociologists and 'revisionist historians' have set themselves resolutely against this depiction of punishment as an expression of increasingly civilized humanity. Treating modern punishment as an index of 'civilization' may be rhetoric, but it makes for bad history and uncritical sociology"<sup>11</sup>.

The quest for justice, then, becomes a serious question for the modern society. Its implications for the indigenous societies are quite evident, since the role of traditional legal systems is being greatly undermined by modern developments. The establishment and functioning of the statutory panchayats in village India are gradually replacing the traditional panchayats and their legal patterns. Thus the quest for justice in folk communities too is being replaced by the so-called modern jurisprudence. The conception of modern law (i.e., "all are equal before the law") is practiced with differential treatment, in which "powerless" groups remain disadvantaged. This system is oriented to favour a particular section of people, namely those having "power".

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<sup>11</sup> D. Garland, *op. cit.* p. 196.

## Folk Art and Quest for Justice

The well-known artist, Jyoti Sahi, begins his reflections by challenging the conventional association of culture with 'fine', noble, orderly etc. According to him, this conception of culture which has a class character, represents as it does the elite and the dominant, underlies also the conception of art (hence the expression "*fine arts*"). Drawing inspiration from Hindu mythology, particularly from the myth of the churning of the cosmic ocean, Sahi shows the different cultural attitudes and values in our contemporary world and their interplay. In folk art, as much as in folk culture, the chaos, the rough, the poison, the snake and so on, are an important constituent of aesthetics. The author goes on to reflect on this marginalized stream of folk art, its characteristics and its implications.

When a reference is made to culture, generally what is being implied is the culture which represents the powerful and educated in society. This culture, often called the "high" culture, becomes associated with status, and is cherished not so much because of its intrinsic value, but as a way to identify a particular group who claims an exalted place in the community. To have culture, in this sense, means to belong to this elite. In contrast, those who are not accepted as part of this exalted few, are often looked down upon as having "no culture", or a very crude or undeveloped culture. The term "Folk culture" often carries this pejorative sense.

We are in the habit of distinguishing between the "cultured" and the vulgar, meaning unmannered. This of course brings us to the very difficult problem of "style", which I cannot discuss here, except to point out that style is not only a matter of aesthetics or taste, but also of fashion, which is always culturally determined. That there is a culture which *belongs* to the unmannered and illiterate seems hard to conceive of. The tendency is only to think that the art of peasants or

Adivasis as having a particular "style", in the way that some people talk about the "Warli style" (the Warlis being an Adivasi community in the western part of India). This "style" sometimes becomes fashionable, and is adopted by the "cultured". But it is not really taken seriously as representing a world view in itself, and as arising integrally out of a whole way of life, which it is essential for us to understand and share in, if we are to really appreciate the "style".

In India we speak of "Lalit" Kala, which is the same as "Fine arts". But what about "Dalit" Kala—the art of those who have been down trodden, oppressed? Can such members of our society boast of a distinctive culture of their own, arising out of their own life experience? The fact is that the oppressed often long for a "high culture" which will give them the promise of a higher status in society. For example, often the heroes of the enslaved are the very figures of those who have enslaved them. There is a kind of perversity in human nature which wants to become like the person who is most feared, and even hated. The simple tenant farmer might fantasize about being a land lord. Those who live in slums, or on the streets, can be found queuing up for hours to see a film which depicts the wanton pleasures, and foolish escapades of the indolent rich. In fact, part of being oppressed is not only an economic state of dependency, but also a cultural indebtedness which destroys all real freedom of creative expression. Symbols and cultural forms are borrowed from the dominant group, in order to "ape" the very life styles which have created a state of cultural subservience.

What we are interested in here is the counter-cultural potential which we find in the cultures of those who are oppressed. This aspect of their culture is not a consequence of their oppression. Once a tribal leader told me that only those tribals who fail in the prevailing educational system are the true Adivasis. He was not being cynical. What he was suggesting was that there is something in the culture of the down trodden which is totally *other* than the culture of the powerful. In fact this culture may be so different in its value system, that those who are faithful to this culture may have to fail as far as the cultural standards of the ruling elite are concerned, not because their culture is inferior to

the dominant culture, but because it is in a way superior, resisting as far as possible those corrupting values which are the basis for a society in which the culture of the rich prevails.

Take for example the culture of violence and greed which we find in the competitive market economy of today. This culture appears to succeed, and to enslave those whom it seeks to exploit. The culture of the colonialists, for example, is always inferior to those who are colonized in that the former is aggressive and exploitative, and the latter is gentle and receiving. Looked at from this perspective, the cultures of those indigenous peoples whom the colonialists conquered were everywhere of a much higher quality than that of the colonialists. And yet these indigenous cultures were often destroyed !

But ultimately speaking we are now beginning to realize how narrow and destructive the dominant culture has been, in comparison with the welcoming and initially very open-hearted cultures of those who were exploited. Ultimately we will certainly find that the competitive Technological culture which just now seems so successful, will in fact destroy itself by destroying the whole environment. Increasingly modern thinkers are suggesting that it is not the most aggressive who are ultimately the survivors, but those whose cultures are able to co-operate with others, and live in harmony with the natural environment.

There is a "subaltern" theory concerning the marginalized in history, which argues cogently that in the last analysis, it is always the aggressor who is indebted to the cultural values of those who have been subjugated and impoverished. In the case of a robber or dacoit, it is not the person who attacks who is in possession of the riches, but the one who is the injured party. Such a realization throws a totally different light upon the whole question as to who is in fact cultured. Instead of looking for culture in the dominant group, we should rather turn our attention to those cultures which have not been aggressive, but have been ready to live in harmony with others. It is from this perspective that I would like to approach what is rather vaguely termed "folk culture", as being not the marginalized culture, but rather the cultural norm, representing all those peoples who have through the centuries lived in harmony with each other and their environment, with no intention to dominate others.



## Different ways of approaching folk culture

We could begin by outlining three different ways in which we might approach the culture of the oppressed.

1) Those who have been marginalized do have a culture, but they have become marginalized partly *because* of their culture. Their culture is too elemental, and crude. It is loaded with superstitious beliefs which prevent the poor from advancing, and being more competitive. Though there are good aspects in the traditional folk cultures of village people, these folk cultures need "advancing" or "modernizing".

2) There is no culture among the poor and down-trodden worth the name. It is the task of the rich and cultured to help the poor to "come up" and adopt the culture of those who are successful in society. Part of the social obligations of those who are refined and cultured is to educate the vast majority whose lives have been conditioned by the struggle for basic necessities, to give them a taste for culture.

3) The culture which we find among the simple rural communities is disappearing. They *had* a wonderful culture, but now, because of ignorance, this has been lost. Tribal and folk culture must be preserved, because they are the cultural reserves for all future cultures to draw upon. The simple must not be allowed to abandon their culture. It is the task of the rich and powerful to make sure that simple and innocent people remain where they are, so that they are protected from the corrupting values of our modern technological and scientific age.

It is easy to recognize these view points in the way that different people approach folk cultures, coming from a background of an educated and cultural elite. We are often able to hear these arguments put forward in different ways by the same person, notwithstanding the fact that deep contradictions can be noticed between these approaches. For example, the idea that the poor have no real culture of their own, is often juxtaposed with an argument which suggests that "folk culture" has to be preserved. The same person who in one breath says that simple village or tribal people should be protected from the evil effects of our modern culture, can be heard saying that villagers have to get rid of their superstitious beliefs.

Many seem unable to reconcile on the one hand a romantic belief in an age of innocence, and cultural harmony with nature, and on the other hand a habit of mind which assumes that there is cultural progress, and the rational analytical mind is also important for the future of the human race. Generally we can notice certain unspoken assumptions which support the need for keeping the status quo, to allow the dominant culture, and those who belong to it, to continue the process of dominating over other cultures. The powerful like to simultaneously feel better than, and yet protective of, those who are socially below them. Here we see clearly the political interests which often prevail in the area of cultural exchange, however unconsciously.

How can we approach the culture of the oppressed without ourselves falling into one of the above intellectual traps? Can we accept the culture of the oppressed without being patronizing? Can we remark on its worth, without adding that it should never change? In other words, can we look at culture without thinking of it only as a commodity, or a heritage, or a block? Can we *humanize* culture in such a way as to see that cultures are related to people rather than things, to processes rather than products?

### **Culture as a process**

Perhaps a useful way to begin is to view culture as a response to a given situation. This response is not just a reaction, but is a creative encounter. We tend to view processes as only linear, as in the Judeo Christian deterministic model of comprehending history. We forget that all the old myths about culture took into account the unexpected and random. Culture, we are told in many ancient myths, emerged not out of "order", but rather "Chaos" or "No-thing". Culture is like milk boiling over during the South Indian "Pongul" harvest festival. The newly harvested rice cooked with milk suddenly rises, spilling over from the vessel when you least expect it. This seems to be a good symbol for culture.

Tagore speaks of culture as that which over-flows, spilling unexpectedly out of its own inner abundance. If we want a word to describe culture, "grace" would be much more appropriate than "gravity". Gravity implies a kind of sediment which

deposits itself at the bottom. But grace leaps up and forth, crosses boundaries, and seems itself to be the child of turbulence. Such processes which depend on circular intertwining currents are to be contrasted with mechanical, logical laws, whose results are predictable. There is something unpredictable and unaccountable about culture, which makes it a living process rather than a dead, clock-like system.

### **The myth of the churning of the cosmic ocean**

One of the most ancient myths of India describes the churning of the Cosmic ocean. Gods and demons, those who live above in the skies, and those who live below in the under worlds, came together in this enterprise. A mighty tree trunk was chosen to be the axis or rotating churn which must activate the primal waters. The cosmic serpent Shesha was used to spin the trunk backwards and forwards like a traditional village butter churn, whilst the pivotal point below the rotating column was placed on the back of the primordial tortoise who lives at the bottom of the ocean, and is supposed to be the oldest of all creatures, both slow and introverted, and yet out-lasting all other forms of life.

The gods and demons pulled backwards and forwards, using the coiling serpent who is also the milky way, or the stream of cosmic energy, in an eternal game of tug-of-war. The sea of milk was churned this way and that, activating its very depths with a movement that created endless turbulence amongst its waves. Then things began to happen, and various qualities or "products" started to split and surface. The first creation to rise from this process of change, was pure poison — so terrible that it could have destroyed everything. Shiva had to swallow this poison to save creation — and it even turned his throat blue. But then better creations arose and took shape, until at last pure nectar came up from the depths, which both the gods and the demons wanted to grab. They were deceived in this by another divine intervention, as Vishnu appeared in the form of 'Mohini' a dancing woman, who enchanted all creatures, so distracting the acquisitive, that they forgot to try and possess the source of cosmic life, being plunged into a kind of oblivion. From this we might learn that ultimately speaking, culture cannot

be possessed or controlled by any vested interest. It is to be enjoyed by all.

In this story, I feel, we have an adequate account of how culture emerges from certain primordial and social interactions. The way in which the Devas and Asuras interact to bring about culture, is, I feel, an intuition which can help us understand how the so called *fine* and *rude* or *crude* elements together produce culture. Culture is also not just all sweetness and light — it is also very dangerous and poisonous. It has the power both to destroy and immortalize. The myth also presents us with a very powerful metaphor to show how unpredictable culture is, and how a transcendent God has to intervene in culture in order both to save creatures which the process inherent in culture itself might destroy, and to save culture itself from those who want to grab it, and make it their own property. We have to be saved from all that is deadening in culture, and at the same time what is living in culture has to be saved from what is destructive in human society.

I would like to explore in greater detail certain elements which we find symbolized in this myth, in order to discover the underlying patterns of meaning that give life to culture.

### Culture and nature — the symbols of the tree and the snake

According to a particular variety of western dialectical thought, culture is conceived of as opposite to nature, in the same way that order is supposed to be at variance with chaos, or light is totally different from darkness. That is why in Greek thought, Chaos, has to be conquered, and subdued by order, before creation can emerge. This negative view of chaos entered into christianity through the story about the garden of Eden which we find in the first book of the Bible, and later reinforced by a legend concerning George, the energy behind the earth (Geo-orge) who had to subdue a dragon. Dragons and snakes have a very bad press in the Judeo-Christian tradition, though there does exist in the subaltern sources of the First Testament of the Bible, an image of Leviathan, the Creature of the depths, and also a healing serpent, who has continued to remain a subliminal factor in Judeo-Christian symbolic thought. In the Genesis story about the snake and



the tree at the Centre of the garden of paradise, the snake is described as an agent of the dark and evil forces. But here in the Indian myth, as recounted in the story of the churning of the cosmic Ocean, the snake Shesha has a very positive role to play. Wrapped round the stump of the Tree, he is used, as one might use the chord of a simple lathe, in order to turn the wood, and thus churn the waters.

The snake lies at the very heart of the folk cultures of India. It is essentially a creature of the wild, full of rhythmic movement, but yet also very unpredictable. It is the energy of life, but it is also dangerous. It symbolizes the respect with which folk culture views and handles nature. Culture is not meant to tame, or dominate over nature, but rather to work along with its rhythms. Nor is the churn to be equated with Newton's much favoured pendulum. The pendulum is mechanical in a way which is not typical of nature — the churn, like all cyclical processes in nature is essentially the agent (of chaos, in that it generates turbulence. Ultimately, you cannot be sure which way the tree will spin, any more than you can predict which way the spiraling wind will move through the tree's branches. It all depends on which forces are prevailing in the atmosphere around.

This image of the primordial churning of the oceans, like the image of boiling milk, recognizes the intimate connection between nature and culture, Creation and Chaos, the Spirit and the primal Void, whilst also noting that these interlinking functions are not *mechanically* connected, but rather they synchronize as in the intertwining rhythms of a dance. The one is enfolded in the other, in the same way that scientists speak of the implicate order as twisting into and around the explicate order, which is what we are generally talking about when we speak of order. Chaos is not just "dis-order", but the other, implicate dimension of what we are calling order. The image of being wrapped round, shaped together, reminds us that when we speak of ecology, we need to recognize that culture and nature are intimately bound together. That is an intuition that folk cultures never lose sight of, that the processes giving rise to cultural exploitation can lead to vast and horrifying ecological consequences. This vision underlies, as I see it, many popular legends, including the one which is supposed to explain

the festival of Nag-panchmi, when villagers worship snakes, and apologize for any damage caused to their habitat in the process of ploughing up the fields during the rainy season.

### **Poison rising from the depths.**

All ancient cultures (like modern technologies) were obsessed with the problem of waste and pollution. Poison is the very essence of chaotic energy which turns against life. That is what comes to the surface first. The problem of what to do with pollution is the continual question when islands of order emerge out of chaos. In a sense all that we are noting as cultural oppression — in India the caste system is an example of this — is itself a kind of "poison" coming from a deep fear of pollution. Like a typical neurosis, it tries to "wash away" the guilt, by containing and isolating what it perceived as dangerous and infecting elements of nature, or society. The "outcaste" is rejected because this person, or the culture represented by the person, is feared as dangerous to the "social order". But invariably it is precisely here that the sources of life are most vital and challenging.

The cult of violence in every religion can be traced back to this anxiety about pollution. The Jewish concept of the "scape goat" is an example of this element of fear which we find in all cultures. It is this psychological fear which brought Jesus to the Cross, an out-caste because he dared to challenge the existing social order of his times. The most recent and horrifying manifestation of this fear of the "other" is to be found in the concept of "ethnic cleansing" (which of course is an idea almost coeval with the origins of culture itself). The pollutant is the "other" who cannot be absorbed, and therefore threatens to destroy. Only the transcendent Other (God) can help absorb this terrifying element back, by swallowing the poison, and thus recreating the harmony of a "whole".

We might recall the prophet Jonah, who by running away from his mission to society gone wrong (Nineveh) brought about a natural storm which nearly destroyed the boat in which he was trying to escape. Only by allowing himself to be swallowed up in Leviathan (the primordial chaos of creation) could he return to the true purpose for which he as a prophet had been commissioned — to bring Nineveh to repentance!

Counter-culture has the suffering task of bringing a maverick culture which has gone astray, back to course.

Many are mystified by the terrible images which seem to play so central a part in folk cultures. Take for example the image of the dark goddess, Kali. Does she represent the repressed frustration of a subjugated peasantry, who have no other means of protest, than to remind a dominant class that creative energies of the cosmos will in the end swallow up everyone? Who in fact is the poison — the oppressor or the oppressed? Is Kali (and other images of the Black Madonna) ultimately a warning to those who dare to use culture for their own selfish purposes? Indian mythology is full of tyrant kings who are brought to their nemesis by the very forces that they tried to exploit. Hiranya Kashipu is disembowled by the Lion-god Narasimha. God can be a dangerous enemy to the arrogant.

Others suggest that these dark and terrible (ugra) images of the divine, which we find in folk culture, represent an internalized experience of fear and rejection. Those who are themselves tortured by evil structures in society, can identify their condition with a suffering Jesus on the Cross. There is a recurring tendency to picture God in our own image. The oppressed imagine the Divine sorrow and anger, whilst those who are dominant tend to set up images of God as ruler, whose "divine right" they attempt to appropriate to themselves, as ministers of that transcendent authority. Can images help us to liberate culture from those who try to use culture as a tool to preserve the status-quo, and legitimize their own position of power?

Culture has a way of eluding trite solutions — the image is like a sword cutting two ways. I remember a story about a famous Indian artist who represented an Indian Woman politician as Durga, sitting on a lion, armed for the kill. To begin with, this was thought to be a compliment, and the politician was flattered. Later, some naughty journalist suggested that the artist was being ironical, and those close to the political power, suspected subversion. Who was right? Was the artist praising, or mocking? The artist himself was unhelpful. "You can take my image as you like!" he commented, "Those who think the politician is like a god, may be flattered; but those who feel that this is a presumption on her part, have also a

right to their opinion!" The artist as a prophetic agent of culture, is like a mirror. The purpose of an image is to reveal a reality. *The reality which the oppressed are familiar with is a terrible reality. It is this reality which we often find depicted in folk art.*

It has been pointed out that Christian art since the renaissance has concentrated on the Suffering image of Christ. We are reminded of the "Han" masks of Korean folk theatre which represent the face of the resigned, and yet also the ironical "idiot" so beloved in folk culture. The fool, clown, dunce are typical of folk drama, who miss no opportunity to "show up" the dominant culture for what it is — a trick against the people. The cultural hero of the marginalized is the marginalized person, who cannot be "put down" because, like in the Punch and Judy show, the person who is knocked down has an uncanny habit of jumping up again. *There is a kind of black humour in folk art which defeats the purpose of even those who want to domesticate suffering, by telling the under-dog that he has a privileged position in God's plan.* The Christ image of today, as we might observe it emerging from a new type of folk art, is shifting from the passive carrier of all our burdens, to a kind of trickster who can ultimately laugh at those who try to oppress him.

### **Towards an aesthetics of the rough**

We began by pointing out that the cultured sometimes talk about "Fine art". Culture is supposed to be something smooth and refined. Nature is not only raw — it is also rough. Those who live close to the soil are also thought to be rough and crude. *Certainly if we look at folk art we note this sense of the elemental and rough.*

Roughness is not unrelated to darkness and that which is distorted. What we call rough and crude is itself an aspect of nature as we experience it. The roughness of nature is where it becomes unmanageable and hence uncomfortable. Culture as understood by the rich who want to dominate over nature and their fellow human beings, should be smooth and polished because it is in that way that nature can be controlled and deadened. Folk art is a deep appreciation of the natural textures



of life; in fact, village crafts celebrate these natural textures as part of the fullness and beauty of life. The more urbanized a community becomes, the less it seems to appreciate natural textures. The ideal is the artificial in the sense of contrived and unnatural. Here "finish" is valued, and as we know, to "finish" something not only means to complete it — it also means to kill it. *Much of Fine art is Fishished art. There is no life left in it.*

That is the reason why many artists want to return to folk art, because they want to rediscover the rough and elemental. It is this quality that has life. The deadening effect of civilization is where we lose all contact with nature, and live in a kind of island of order. Order has to do with perfection, whereas roughness is close to wholeness. Wholesome food is rough food — when it becomes smooth and polished, it becomes tasteless, and bad for health.

### The symbol of the full vessel

In the end, after the churning of the cosmic ocean has been completed, what emerges from the turbulent waves is the full vessel, or *Purna Kumbha*. The image of the overflowing pot is a recurring and basic symbol of Indian folk art, finding its way into classical iconography as a profoundly significant form. The symbol is very simple and elemental. The pot is basic to the life of villagers, used not only to carry water or milk, and all kinds of precious articles, but also to cook food in. In the simple village home we often see pots piled one on top of the other, and used as a storage place for different household goods. The village potter, who makes the everyday vessels which are expendable, assumes an important role in the ritual life of folk culture.

The art of Indian villagers, and Adivasis, revolves round certain very simple forms, which we can term *aniconic*. That is to say, they do not so much "represent" or "imitate" other forms, as to have a presence and reality of their own. Folk art does not rely on a very developed imagery which requires highly skilled crafts-persons, and very expensive materials. Art and culture is essentially "provisional" and "immediate", that is readily available, using materials and objects which can be found in the near-at-hand locality. Objects of everyday use are preferred, such as the broom, winnowing fan, pot, grinding

stone, plough and other agricultural implements. All these objects are invested with a spiritual significance. Such symbols are "earthed" or rooted in everyday life, and therefore have a wholeness about them, which the more evolved forms of temple art tends to lose.

*Another characteristic of folk art is the way in which it uses waste material, re-cycling things which have been discarded as of "no use".* This is part of an in-built sense of economy, which does not want to waste anything, because everything is seen as precious. But it also arises from a profound sense of the hidden meaning in the apparently useless and rejected.

We also note that images, like other forms which we find in nature, are conceived of as "occasional", that is to say they emerge from the whole rhythm of life, and are believed to disappear in the same way as they have appeared. They cannot be grasped in the sense of possessed. They have a tendency to disintegrate, or be absorbed back into the very churning flux from which they were momentarily recovered. That, as I see it, is the significance of the myth concerning "Mohini-Āta", the play of illusion, or enchantment. The vessel of life which arose at least from the churning of the oceans, could not be possessed because it essentially belongs to the process of creation itself, and therefore has to return again to the very waters from which it arose.

The village deities who are created on certain occasions, at the time of seasonal festivals, have to be allowed to return again to the very earth and water from which they had first been constructed. Such images are themselves impermanent, requiring the constant effort to recreate, to once again churn the waters. The cosmic act of churning the oceans can never be finished; even after the vessel of life emerges, the task of bringing life forth again continues. The actors cannot just sit back to enjoy the fruits of their labour. In fact joy is to be found not in the product, but in the process. That is the mystery of creation.

At this point we begin to realize there is a curious correspondence between the first and the last product of the churning process. When discussing the idea of poison, we

realized that what folk culture is most concerned about is the meaning of waste, and the need to recycle what culture produces. Finally, the most powerful images which we find in folk culture are themselves made from waste materials. The peasant living close to the earth cannot think of anything as dispensable, or useless, in the way that a consumer society relies on a "throw-away" culture. Cow dung and ashes, which are "waste products", are attributed with vital spiritual significance. Far from being polluting, they themselves become the ingredients of the elixir of life.

If we look carefully at the network of symbols which create the web of folk culture, we find that the sacred is never divorced from the profane, and that everyday things are respected as ways of perceiving the spiritual. This inter-locking of the ordinary and the "hierophany" or manifestation of the Holy, is often disconcerting. In the village drama we might find scenes of the highest spiritual realms inter-leaved with what appears almost vulgar. The mixture might shock as being almost blasphemous.

In the continuing discussion on what "secular" means in the Indian context, even those who claim that "secularism" as a political ideology is just a western concept, need to consider more carefully what the "holy" implies in folk culture. I would suspect that the cultural streams which gave rise to the secular society of the west, stem not so much from the rationalism and enlightenment of Renaissance Europe, as from deep counter-cultural trends coming from a universal folk tradition which began to re-assert itself against the prevailing Metacosmic religious orthodoxies. This folk tendency to look for the spiritual in the immediate and earthy reality of life is not specially European; it is found everywhere, and represents one of the basic elements of a spiritual tradition which preceded the emergence of organized civilized society. Why it is upsetting to the Indian Upper class (as it was upsetting to the Church Hierarchies in Europe) is that it questions the dominant culture of those who believe in the Refined and Metacosmic as the essence of Culture.

## Conclusion

In this brief outline of certain features which we find in folk culture, I have tried to stress that underlying the various

forms which we associate with the rough and elemental art of those who live close to the earth, there is an aesthetics which springs from a whole integrated value system. This underlying approach to life gives meaning to the crude, the simple, the rough, the unfinished, and the natural etc. Often what we are calling "fine art", that is the art of the dominant and civilized elite, rejects this whole value system on which folk culture rests.

If we look carefully we find that there is a value system underlying even the concept of culture as proposed by those who argue in favour of "Fine art" or "Lalit Kala". And this value system marginalizes and dehumanizes the real culture of the ordinary people by *rejecting* the values on which their whole life style and world view has been founded. Thus what we might call the art world of the Fine Arts is aligned to the prevailing consumeristic model of an unjust society in which we live. Here an attempt is made to possess life, which is what the Asuras in the myth tried to do, when the vessel of Amrit emerged from the cosmic oceans.

Competition, elaboration, show, costly materials, expensive consumption of energy in the form of over-working materials, grandeur of scale, and so forth — these are the familiar hallmarks of "Art" as defined in the great or dominant tradition, which is what we generally think of when we speak of culture. But is this in fact going to be the art of the future? Many artists have already realized that it is "finished" or "dead". This is a question which must concern us not only when we discuss the ethical system on which our society is based, but also when we are concerned with the criteria which our aesthetic values should uphold.

The great tragedy of modern culture is the idea that ethics and aesthetics are two different compartments, with no interconnecting concerns. Such a view point gives rise to moral people who have no taste, and artists who have no conscience. What seems essential for the future is the realization that life is wholeness, and the social worker can no longer ignore the value of art and culture, as the aesthetician cannot ignore politics.



# Folk-Culture as Counter Culture

## The Dalit Experience

Employing the framework of the contrast between the dominant culture and folk or subaltern culture, the author shows that the dalits, despite the oppression and discrimination they suffer, have never been a people mute and resigned to their lot. Theirs is a counter-cultural movement inspired by political and cultural leaders and prophetic mystics who emerged from among them. Their subaltern literature and folk-stories have protest as their breath, which renders them arresting and gripping. What is particularly striking is the fact that their cultural movement represents the strongest critique *from within* the Indic socio-cultural world, against the dominant culture. Their protest has a strong secular character and realism inasmuch as the dalits in their concrete quest for equality and human dignity in everyday life, force the dominant culture out of its alienating and evasive religious moorings.

Human and social life is conditioned by three networks of structures. Economics and politics have to do with the means of production and the exercise of power respectively. These condition directly the 'material' aspects of life. The human persons in community build up a network of relationships. These are kinship and social relations different from the power relations of politics. Culture and religion refer to the symbolic world that seeks to give meaning to this 'material' and 'social' reality. The Human-Social world mediates between the 'material' world and the world of meaning. Different ideologies consider one or other of these worlds as basic to and determinant of others. Thus Marxists consider economics and politics as constituting the basic structure, the others being superstructures. The Weberians give priority to the structures of meaning. The Philosophers — phenomenologists, existentialists, humanists — in general consider the humans as free agents who can creatively manipulate and change the 'material' and symbolic elements of their universe. While it is not necessary to get involved in this

dispute about priorities, it is good to realise the complexity of these structures which interact mutually and to recognize the freedom and capacity of the humans to be creative in the midst of these various conditionings.

A particular culture normally reflects the socio-economic and political conditions of a community. But the reflection is not a mirror image, but a free creation of the humans. Therefore it also reflects the human reaction to the situation. There is an adage which says: "The humans make culture and culture makes the humans". Every person grows into the culture of the community through a process of inculturation. But because that person is free, he/she can also challenge that culture to change in the light of his/her experience of life and reality. This is how culture changes. But during the process of change there can be tension between different approaches, visions and ideologies.

It is in this context that we have to understand the conflict between the dominant and the dominated groups in the community. We take for granted here that in the types of communities that we know, there is a gap between the economically and politically dominant, and those who are dominated. At the cultural level, this is seen as the tension between the dominant cultures and one or many subaltern cultures. One could identify the subaltern cultures as folk-cultures or cultures of the people as distinguished from the dominant culture, which is the culture of the economic and political elite.

There are two more cultural elements that complicate this picture. On the one hand, in most communities there may be a group of intellectuals, who are non-conformist and critical of the dominant culture. Some of these may also give voice to the concerns of the dominated. But most of them belong to the elite and this may condition their point of view. On the other hand, we have, what has been called, a 'popularized' culture, which is not the creation of the people, but an artificial product, manufactured and purveyed through the media by the dominant group.<sup>1</sup> This culture alienates the people and serves the interests of the dominant group. When I speak of folk-culture, I refer

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1 Cf. Armand Mattelart and Seth Siegelaub (eds), *Communication and Class Struggle*, Vol. 2: Liberation, Socialism (New York, International General, 1983) 11-16.

to the real culture of the people, which often is a protest culture, challenging the accepted orthodoxies of the dominant culture.

### The Dalit movement as counter-cultural

In the following pages I would like to explore certain characteristics of the cultures of the Dalits as a protest culture. 'Dalit' means 'broken', 'ground down'. This is the name that the former Untouchables prefer to give themselves today. This name itself represents a counter-cultural statement. The dominant culture considers them Untouchables. The political elite use a neutral term and call them the 'Scheduled Castes'. Gandhi who was really interested in abolishing untouchability, but who, sharing the dominant culture, saw positive elements in the caste system, called them *Harijans* or 'people of God'. But the dominated people find this name patronizing and choose to call themselves 'Dalits', the broken, the oppressed.<sup>2</sup> Thus the name itself is a counter-cultural affirmation.

Zelliot, for instance, has contrasted the approaches of Gandhi and Ambedkar, which illustrates this point. Both wanted the abolition of untouchability. But Gandhi looked at the problem as a person belonging to a higher caste, whereas Ambedkar saw it from the point of view of a Dalit. Zelliot writes:

The conflict between the two men can be defined in several ways: Ambedkar's insistence on the *rights* of the Depressed Classes versus Gandhi's stress upon the *duty* of the caste Hindus to do penance; Ambedkar's complete rejection of caste versus Gandhi's defence of *caturvarna* (the idealized four-caste system with no untouchability) as necessary to Hinduism; Ambedkar's rational democratic liberalism versus Gandhi's appeals to traditional modes of thought; and the inevitable clash between the aggressive demands of a minority group leader and the slower, broader-based and somewhat paternalistic extension of rights by the majority group reformer.<sup>3</sup>

In the context of the movement for Dalit liberation, the characteristic of a protest culture seems to be that it does not

2 Cf. M. E. Prabhakar (ed), *Towards a Dalit Theology* (Delhi, ISPCK, 1989), p. 1

3 Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit. Essays on Ambedkar Movement*. (Delhi, Manohar, 1992), p. 133

move away from the main culture against which it protests, but criticizes it from within. The criticism can either take the form of an affirmation of the basically human and rational which the dominant culture has ignored, or reclaim the ancient roots which the dominant culture is accused of having subverted, or point to the correct interpretation and application of values which the dominant culture itself professes. There may be other forms too. But I would like to illustrate here these three kinds of criticism with reference to recent Dalit movements in India. More than one kind of criticism may be found in the same movement.

### **Ambedkar and Buddhism**

Ambedkar is the acknowledged hero of the contemporary Dalit movements in India. He felt that Hinduism was the cause of the oppressions of the caste system. In 1936, he told his people, the Dalits of Maharashtra:

Because we have the misfortune of calling ourselves Hindus, we are treated thus. If we were members of another Faith, none would dare treat us so. Choose any religion which gives you equality of status and treatment. We shall repair our mistake now. I have the misfortune of being born with the stigma of an Untouchable. However, it is not my fault; but I will not die a Hindu, for this is in my power<sup>4</sup>.

Ambedkar waited twenty years, till 1956, to become a buddhist and died two months later. During this period he did explore the possibility of converting to Islam, Christianity or Sikhism. But he finally chose Buddhism, because it is part of the greater Indian tradition. As a matter of fact many Hindus would consider Buddhism as an off-shoot of Hinduism and Buddha himself as an avatar of Vishnu. But the modern Buddhists would consider Buddhism as having Indic roots, more ancient than the coming of Hinduism into India with the Aryans. Besides, Buddhism, as interpreted by Ambedkar, provided a rational, human moral system without too much religious and ritual trappings. The choice of Buddhism therefore provided a continuity in discontinuity.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Zelliott, *From Untouchable*, p. 206.



Side by side with this choice of Buddhism, the Dalits also felt that they had a glorious culture of their own in the past. Zelliott reports:

The folk beliefs of today's Dalits centre around three ideas: a) the idea that they are and were creators of culture; b) the idea that they were "Lords of the Earth", the original inhabitants of their areas shunted aside by the Aryan invaders; c) the idea they were and are a militant people, with heroes who used their strength in a self-sacrificial way for their people<sup>5</sup>.

Zelliott finds these folk beliefs prevalent also among Dalits in other areas besides Maharashtra. The first of these beliefs is graphically illustrated by a saying of Ambedkar:

The Hindus wanted the Vedas and they sent for Vyasa who was not a caste Hindu. The Hindus wanted an Epic and they sent for Valmiki who was an Untouchable. The Hindus wanted a Constitution and they sent for me.<sup>6</sup>

As a matter of fact, there is a group of Dalits in North India who claim to be descendants of Valmiki. In spite of their oppressed conditions today, they claim, not only to have had a glorious past, but also to have contributed to the creation of the culture which the Hindus claim as their own. Some groups of Dalits have claimed to be the original peoples of the land: the Adi-Dravidas in the South and the Adi-Dharm people in the North. This claim has been recently revived by some Christian Dalit groups<sup>7</sup>. There are also stories to show how the Dalits were tricked into becoming such by a mistake for which they were not responsible. One such story goes as follows.

Four brothers are swimming in the river. They see a cow struggling in the quick sand. They send the youngest to help it. Before he could reach her, she dies. They oblige him to dispose of the carcass. Thus he loses his status.

Such stories show that the Dalits had counter-cultural accounts of their origin and of the causes of their present state for which they themselves are not responsible.

5 Zelliott, *From Untouchable*, 318.

6 Ibid., p. 317.

7 A. M. Abraham Ayrookuzhiel, *The Dalit Desiyata* (Delhi, ISPCK, 1990); James Massey, *A Concise History of the Dalits* (Delhi, ISPCK, 1991)

**Dalit literature: Maharashtra**

*Chokhamela* is an untouchable Marathi devotee of Lord Vithoba of Pandarpur born in the second half of the 13th century. As an untouchable he had no free access to the temple. He refers to his social status in a few of his bhakti poems, some times accepting, but at other times protesting.

If You had to give me this birth,  
     why give me birth at all?  
 You cast me away to be born; you were cruel.  
 O God, my caste is low; how can I serve you?  
 Every one tells me to go away; how can I see you?  
 When I touch anyone, they take offence.  
 Chokhamela wants your mercy.  
 The only impurity is in the five elements.  
 There is only one substance in the world.  
 Then who is pure and who is impure?  
 The cause of pollution is the creation of the body.  
 In the beginning, at the end, there is  
     nothing but pollution.  
 No one knows anyone who was born pure.  
 Chokha says, in wonder, who is pure?'<sup>8</sup>

Chokhamela inspired at least one modern admirer to revolt and bravery. Kisan Fagu Bansode in the 1920s invited his fellows:

Chokha went into the temple resolutely,  
 Why do you, ashamed, stay far off?  
 You are the descendants of Chokha.  
 Why do you fear to enter the temple?  
 Brace yourself like a wrestler, come,  
 Together let us conquer pollution.<sup>9</sup>

Contemporary Dalit poetry is more secular and more protesting. Arun Kamble addresses a Brahmin:

If you were to live the life we live  
 (then out of you would poems arise)  
 We : kicked and spat at for our piece of bread.  
 You : fetch fulfillment and name of the Lord.  
 We : down-gutter degraders of our heritage.

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8 Zelliott, *From Untouchable*, pp. 5-6.

9 Ibid., p. 11.

You : its sole repository and descendants of the sage.

We : never have a paisa to scratch our arse.

You : the golden cup of offerings in your bank.

Your bodies flame in sandal-wood.

Ours you shovel under half-turned sand.

Wouldn't the world change, and fast,

if you were forced to live at last

this life that's all we've ever had ? (286-287)<sup>10</sup>

Keshav Meshram's passionate words of protest remind us of Job: they are even stronger :

On my birthday, I cursed God.

I cursed him, I cursed him again.

...

"Would you chop a whole cart full of wood  
for a single piece of bread ?

Would you wipe the sweat of your bony body  
with your mother's ragged sari ?

Would you wear out your brothers and sisters  
for your father's pipe ?

Would you work as pimp

to keep him in booze ?

Oh Father, Oh God the Father !

You could never do such things,

First you'd need a mother —

one no one honours,

one who toils in the dirt,

One who gives and gives of her love".<sup>11</sup>

The Dalit poets look to past tradition for models who share their experience, and leaders who have shown compassion. The Buddha (Tathagatha), of course, has a place of honour. They also recall figures like Eklavya, who was low born, but mastered archery invoking mentally the famous Dhrona as his guru. But he is discovered and the guru demands the sacrifice of his thumb, so that he may not triumph over his favourite Arjuna. Waman Nimbalkar writes:

Gathering the sky in my eyes,

I cast my glance forwards,

10 Ibid., pp. 286-287.

11 Ibid., pp. 300-301.

...and so on to Tathagatha.  
 On the horizon I will erect  
 the rainbow arch of mankind.  
 I am conscious of my resolve.  
 The worth of the blood  
 of Eklavya's broken finger —  
 This is my loyalty<sup>12</sup>.

They also reject the classical images of the Buddha and see him as full of compassion walking through the slums, among the poor and the suffering people. The Buddha then becomes the model for a new religious practice. Daya Pawar sings:

I never see you  
 In Jetawana's garden  
 Sitting with closed eyes  
 In meditation, in the lotus position:  
 Or  
 In the caves of Ajanta and Elura  
 With stony lips sewn shut  
 Taking the last sleep of your life.  
 I see you  
 Walking, talking,  
 Breathing softly, healingly,  
 On the sorrow of the poor, the weak;  
 Going from hut to hut  
 In the life-destroying darkness  
 Torch in hand,  
 Giving the sorrow  
 That drains the blood  
 Like a contagious disease  
 A new meaning<sup>13</sup>.

### Counter-culture in Kerala

*Pottan* is the deaf and dumb God of the Dalits (Pulayas) of Kerala. The people have a special narrative dance in his honour, called *Thottam*, performed during the festivals. The context of the narrative is the encounter between a high caste person and a Dalit on a narrow path with thorny bushes on both

12 Ibid., p. 284.

13 Ibid., p. 297.



sides. The high caste person orders the Dalit to give way. The Dalit protests and affirms the equality of all human beings. There are two versions of this narrative. One is sung by the Dalits in their own temples. The other is sung in the rest of the temples. The first is secular in style and offers arguments based on reason. In the second, the high caste person becomes a learned Brahmin called Sankara and the Dalit becomes the God Siva himself in disguise and the argument for equality is based on the philosophy of the *advaita*. Whereas the first version is realistic and challenging, the second has been transformed into a mythical story with a moral, losing the sting of reality in the process, though the lesson is preserved. Let us compare the two versions. Here is an extract from the first version:

When your body or ours is hurt  
It is human blood that gushes out.  
The blood is the same.  
Why then quarrel over caste?

...

And the rice you eat, and the rice we eat  
Isn't it of the same stuff?

...

We planted a plantain tree  
In the heap of refuse.  
With the fruit thereof  
You make offerings to God.

...

If so what distinctions are there  
Between us.<sup>14</sup>

In the second version the Dalit reprimands the learned Brahmin who abuses him as an ignoramus and asks him to get out of the path.

What do you mean by the path,  
And who should get out of the path?  
Can you discriminate between  
Truth and Untruth,  
The perennial and the ephemeral,

...

The learned and the low born,

In what respects do we differ?  
If you are omniscient, please tell us.

...  
You know not yourself,  
And yet you are cross with me.

...  
God is the essence of all.  
With thoughts of his glories in mind,  
How may you ask us to move out?  
Darkness of ignorance cloud your mind.<sup>15</sup>

We can see in both versions a counter-cultural message that challenges the accepted orthodoxy of the caste system. It comes out of the oppressed Dalits. They may be trodden down, but they do not lie low without any protest. We see this tradition of protest continued in a practical and creative way by Shree Narayana Guru (1854-1928), giving rise to an alternative culture.<sup>16</sup> Though he was a Dalit (Izhava) he founded temples dedicated to the higher gods of Hinduism. Some of the temples only had symbols like light, stone and mirror, instead of any images. He developed simpler forms of worship. He founded ashrams and educational institutions. His basic message can be found in the following verse:

One jati, one religion, one God, for man of the same blood  
and form, there is no difference. Animals of the same caste  
alone procreate. Viewed thus all humanity belong to one  
caste.<sup>17</sup>

His temples and educational Institutions were open to all. We see here an effort, not only to affirm the basic common humanity of all, but also to re-interpret and thus reclaim Hindu tradition.

### The Ravidasis of Lucknow

The Chamars of Lucknow suffer the same disabilities as Dalits everywhere. But their counter cultural protest centres round the figures of ascetics, who are not only spiritual, but

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The Christian Literature Society, 1983), pp. 179-180.

15 Ibid., pp 173-175.

16 Cf. V. T. Samuel, *One Caste, One Religion, One God. A Study of Shree Narayana Guru.* (New Delhi, Sterling Publishers. 1977)

17 Ibid., p. 98.

also cultural, and sometimes even political leaders. They construct a religious and ascetic tradition which, they claim, is anterior to brahminic Hinduism. It is anti-caste and anti-ritual. Ravidas, a mediaeval dalit saint becomes the symbol of this counter culture. A summary account of some aspects of the ideology of an ascetic leader, named *Achchutananda*, gives a fair idea of this counter-cultural trend. The name itself is very significant, because *achchuta* means unclean. One could say that the name itself is a protest.

1. I believe that God is only one and... formless... Neither is there any book of His; nor does he incarnate, nor is there any image of His...
2. I believe that I am an autochthon of Bharat, hence I am an *adi*-Hindu...
3. I believe that the religion of saints is the original religion of Bharat; being full of humanism, it is beneficial to mankind. Spiritual experiences of such ascetics as Sadashiva, Rshbhadeva, Mahavira, Buddha, Kabir, Ravidas, Dadu, Namadeva and Tulsisaheb can deliver me...
4. I believe that all human beings are equal, and brothers ...; the feeling of high and low is [an illusion. Humans become high and low by their own virtues and vices. Human heart alone is God's temple, hence to practise equality toward the entire humanity is the "supreme religion".
5. I believe that giving up lust, greed, attachment... is one's personal religion.
6. I believe that according to the teachings of Kabir all the Brahman's scriptures are based on selfishness, falsehood, and injustice... I will never have our rites of birth, tonsure ceremony, marriage, and death performed by a Brahman.<sup>18</sup>

One can see here not only a critique of the dominant religion of the Hindus, but a claim to belong to a tradition which is even more ancient and indigenous and which has been lived and propagated by a succession of non-brahmin saints. Even the brahmins cannot ignore their holiness and so they seek to integrate them in their own tradition.

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18 R. S. Khare, *The Untouchable as Himself*. Ideology, Identity and Pragmatism among the Lucknow Chamars. (Cambridge, University Press, 1984). p. 85.

The case of Ravidas himself is significant. He was a leather worker who became an ascetic and established his 'credentials' by working miracles, so that he could not be ignored. The Brahmins therefore integrate him into their system by making him a devout Brahmin in a previous birth, reborn as a Chamar because of a slight mistake that he had made in his previous life. The Chamars, on the contrary, affirm his identity as a Chamar and place him in a long tradition of non-brahmin saints<sup>19</sup>.

The place of the ascetic in Chamar society is also significant. He is not a sannyasi who keeps away from society. He is very much a part of the community as spiritual leader and guide, close to the people and their problems, linked to, if not directly involved in, political action.

### Conclusion

Some anthropologists give the impression that the caste system, with all its injustices, is something that every Indian accepts and interiorizes. These counter-cultural stories show us that it is not so today; perhaps, it has never been so. The Dalits may not have had the economic and political power necessary to fully liberate themselves from the system. But this does not mean that they accepted it without protest. This protest manifests itself in the cultural and religious sphere. If the recent election in Uttar Pradesh is any indication, the Dalits have started asserting their protest also in the political sphere. This is probably the only way in which they can start realizing their counter-cultural vision, hopefully with the help of other people of good will.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp. 41-50.



# Siddhas: The Defiant Saints of Folk Culture

The author, a research scholar, investigates the tradition of Tamil Siddhas and their relationship with the folk culture. Though the Siddhas were ascetics, philosophers, social critics, alchemists and medical practitioners all in one, they could, nevertheless (or precisely because of it?), be very much appealing to the simple people. In fact, their simple but deep and incisive folk songs offer great inspiration to the folk in every situation of life, and they are even today very much part of their cultural heritage. The author underlines the element of social critique and subversiveness present in the Tamil Siddha tradition and points out the potential of this folk tradition for social transformation today.

One of the major reasons for the lack of attention given to Siddha doctrines and spirituality in India is that the texts of the Siddhas are found only in very simple but esoteric folk songs<sup>1</sup>. These songs are available among the rural masses mostly in oral tradition. They are not adverted to by the urban elite. Only recently with interest in folk cultures gaining prominence, the songs of the Siddhas also received some attention. The folklore type of language and style used by the Siddhas in their composition of the songs makes their utterances easily available to the common people who can sing them in simple folk tunes and in a matter-of-fact manner. Some among the common people are also able to find meaningful answers that are appropriate to their particular questions in life.

In the pan-Indian yoga movement, "the Siddhas are famous saints, of exceptional purity of life, who have attained

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1 There are many popular editions of the songs of the Siddhas; some of them are better established texts than others. Easily accessible is the compilation of the Songs of the Siddhas under the title: *Siddhar Periya Gnana-k-Kovai yena vazhanqum Siddhar Padalqal* in two volumes edited by Aru. Ramanathan, published by Prema Pirasuram (first edition in 1959 and many reprints thereafter).

to a semi-divine existence through the practice of yoga."<sup>2</sup> An off-shoot of this pan-Indian tantric yoga movement is the Tamil Siddha school of thought. It is a matter of pride and honour for those in Tamil Nadu to realize that even though the Tamil Siddha movement is part of a pan-Indian tantric yoga tradition, it has some additional components, which are either absent or weak in North Indian Siddhism. In the Tamil Siddha movement, we find, for example, "the *religious* component of anti-ritualism and anti-ceremonialism, as well as a suppression of 'devotion' (*bhakti*) in favour of the stress on ethical principles and quest for knowledge; the *philosophical* component which is stronger in some personalities and weaker in others, and which may be captured under three headings of 'relativism' 'pessimism' and 'disgust'; finally, a very important *social* component, expressed in a pronounced social radicalism and negativism, and, with some Siddhas, 'anti-brahminism'."<sup>3</sup> The *religious*, the *philosophical* and the *social* components of the Tamil Siddha movement make the Tamil Siddhas not only "pious rebels"<sup>4</sup>, but also popular saints: Saints of Tamil folk culture.

Among the Tamil Siddhas are Tirumular, Sivavakkiyar, Pattinattar and Badragiriyar who belong to the period stretching from the sixth to the tenth century A. D. Akappey, Alukuni, Itaikkattar, Katuveli, Enathi, Kalai, Kutampai and Pampatti are considered to be the later Siddhas who probably lived in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries<sup>5</sup>. These Siddhas are revered as Saints by the rural people and there are even local shrines in their honour<sup>6</sup>. Identifying a Siddha as yogi implies that he could be one or more or all of the following: mystic-ascetic, philosopher, magician, physician, alchemist, social-reformer.

2 George Weston Briggs, *Goraknath and the Kanphata Yogis*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1981 (reprint 1982). p. 137.

3 See Kamil V. Zvelebil, *The Poets of the Powers*, London: Rider and Company, 1973, p. 16.

4 T. N. Ganapathy, *The Philosophy of the Tamil Siddhas*, (New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 1993), p. 17.

5 P. Raja, "Tamil Siddhas" in *Journal of the Institute of Asian Studies* VI/2 Mar 1989, 146-150.

6 The names of the Siddhas are quite confusing in the sense that not all of them refer to historical persons directly. Rather, they are derived names based on the texts composed by the Siddhas concerned, or the places they frequented or the kind of activities they did. Often enough they assumed

Primarily, a Siddha is one who has followed the path of yoga asceticism and was successful in attaining a state of peace both within himself and with all and everyone outside himself. We should not forget this basic fact about the Siddhas. As one who has attained self-realization, a Siddha indulges in esoteric poetry to give expression to his enlightened mind. The poetry is usually deep in thought and full of symbols. It is because of this that an uninitiated person or one without someone to guide him in the reading of the Songs of the Siddhas would find it difficult to comprehend them. Yet, the determination of the Siddhas to remain close to the simple, rustic, rural people enabled them to sing in folklore meter and tunes. What is very remarkable is that their songs use very simple language and idiom, actually the colloquial style, to elaborate very deep metaphysical truths.

There are many prejudices and misconceptions about the Siddhas. People also are in fear and awe when it comes to encountering them. The fact is that the yogic-ascetic life of a Siddha enables him to be in possession of extraordinary powers or what is known as *siddhis*. The Siddhis are regarded by the ordinary people as supernatural or occult powers. Further, both through scientific, investigative knowledge and constant practice, the Siddhas developed a functional and efficient system of medicine. With awe and reverence the common people approached the Siddhas for remedies and cures, and were healed of their infirmities. Their medical practices also led them into the understanding of alchemy and they are well-known as expert alchemists too.

A yogi is regarded as one who is very rigorous with himself and secluded from society and its concerns. The Siddhas, on the contrary, were "pious rebels" in society. Their ascetic discipline and yogic lifestyle enabled them to perceive societal

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the names of earlier Siddhas. Consequently, it is extremely difficult to ascertain the exact place and date of the Siddhas, both in the pan-Indian tradition and in the Tamil tradition. The circumstantial evidences and some internal indications in the texts of the songs offer merely clues. We should be content with the understanding that "the importance of chronology must indeed not be exaggerated; for, in India, any treatise contains conceptions which antedates its composition (and are often quite astonishingly old)." See Kamil V. Zvelebil, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

realities in a different perspective. They were quite opposed to the religions, religious practices and superstitions of their day. They were also opposed to the structures of society and social stratifications that established classes and castes among peoples. In their vehement condemnation of these anomalies they are to be seen as social reformers. It should be pointed out that they did not undertake, what we today would expect from social reformers, namely, activities of mass conscientization and mobilization of forces to cause social change. Rather, they became in themselves living models of change, and the masses of rural people drew inspiration from them.

*The Siddhas were social reformers in the sense that they dared to live according to their convictions and ideals, and they refused to conform to the current societal norms. Their possession of extraordinary powers, their service as physicians and their courage to be yogic-mystics made them credible representatives of an alternative culture and a great subversive force.*

In fact, the element of dissent from the official, dominant teachings of society in their songs made them endearing to the victimized, suffering masses. And, more, their subversive arguments couched in simple language and imagery made their songs easily retainable in memory. They continue to be sung to our day by the rural folk. One of the major reasons why the Siddhas and their school of thought did not gain much official support was that the Hindu orthodoxy had "always tended to ignore the *cittar* doctrines, even to suppress them. The works of Siddhas were uncared for, neglected, falsified and even destroyed.... However, among the not so very orthodox masses of the South of India, the Siddha undercurrent has always been very strong, as a part of the entire *yogico-alchemical folklore*, of the mythology of the yogin-magician..."<sup>7</sup>

The Tamil Siddhas are popular Saints not only because they were holy, but also because their holiness struck a heavy blow to the caste system in society. They audaciously challenged the legitimizing doctrines in the dominant Hindu/brahminical religious tradition. Is it not true that the caste system was rationalized and theologically legitimized by the doctrine of

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7 *Ibid.*, pp. 19f.



*karma*? The evil deeds of one's past life was declared to be the cause of one's birth into a particular caste in this life.

This enslaving dogma of rebirth and transmigration of souls was daringly confronted by Civavaakkiyar in one of his songs (No. 46).<sup>8</sup> He lists a few down to earth arguments against the belief in rebirth. Once milked, can milk get back to the udder? When butter has been churned already, can it become curd again? Can a horn (or the conch) be blown, once it is broken? In other words, human life is a once only endeavour for each one. Each human life is as sacred and equal in dignity and honour as every other human life. Where is the question of the brahminical caste system propagated by Hinduism? Civavaakkiyar concludes this song with a simple, categorical statement:

"The dead are not reborn!

Never. Never. Never!!

Civavaakkiyar is one of the major Tamil Siddhas. It is ascertained that at a time when the society was in the iron grip of brahminical control and at a time when the style of life prescribed by this control for all in society was excessively ritualistic and temple-centered, Civavaakkiyar spoke boldly against the prevalent culture. He advocated openly a rational approach to life, society, world and God. In one of his songs (No. 34), temple worship is challenged. He zealously proclaims the exhilarating experience of the indwelling divinity:

Stay where you are  
and study your own selves.

Then you will *become*

the Temple of God, — full of His dance, and spell and song!

Thus declaring categorically that the 'Temple of God' is within the self of each and everyone, the same Siddha, in song 36, denounces the myth of the necessity of the Vedas, the scriptures, the sacred ashes and the muttering of many prayers to find the Lord. Instead, he announces a life of freedom and equality:

Melt with the Heart inside  
and proclaim the Truth.

Then you will join the Light-  
Life without servitude.

8 Citations of Siddha songs in English are taken from Kamil V. Zvelebil, *op. cit.*

"By far the greatest boon for Tamil Nadu is the evolution of what is known as the Siddha system".<sup>9</sup> By and large, it is still unexplored. Yet it is gratifying to note that it still remains the inherited possession of the rural masses. It is quite intricately interwoven into the fabric of Tamil folk culture. The recent interest in researching folk cultures and consequently unearthing the songs of the Siddhas and the Siddha system is a welcome process. However, if the interest is only because of academic curiosity, then the elite tradition will tend to domesticate the rebellious, albeit pious (!), Siddha way of life and turn it into an object of cold, abstract research dissertations. On the contrary, it is hoped that the present interest in Tamil folk culture and folklore, which definitely includes the Siddha system, would unearth the holistic Siddha approach to life, society and God. Bringing to the fore the undercurrent of folk aspirations, particularly the mass yearnings for human dignity and equality should be the goal of any interest shown in folklore, especially the Siddha system of philosophy, medicine and lifestyle.

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9 S. M. L. Lakshmanan, Chettiar, *Folklore of Tamil Nadu*. New Delhi : National Book Trust, India, 1980; first edition : 1973, p. 63.

# Quest for Justice in Folk Verse

## Vemana and His Rustic Poetry

This essay presents the significance of Vemana, a people's poet of eighteenth century Rayalaseema, ignored and very much maligned by the upper castes and classes. His Poems draw inspiration from day to day life of the people and from the lore of folk wisdom. In pithy and terse form but in a striking manner Vemana drives home his observations about and critique of the society of his times. But his insights into human life and society are far reaching, and they remain very valid and actual to our day. His mordant critique of unjust rulers, upper castes and classes, biting sarcasm about exploitative religious agents brim with realism and retain their appeal for the folk who find in him their own voice. People continue to sing these verses in villages and draw inspiration in their life-struggle.

Folk poems, like the other folk media such as folk art, folk dance, folk drama and folk music has characteristics of its own. It is realistic, close to nature and people, and intimately connected to life events and situations. Words employed in it are local, concrete, rough and even uncouth; and yet folk verses are rich in rhyme, often set to music and sung by the folks while engaged in various rural occupations. Poets of such folk verses are none other than the ordinary people themselves without academic qualifications, specialized training and education. Yet their poems are no less creative than others as they spring from the beauty of people's language, their proverbs, similes and the music that is peculiar to each language. These are present in people's daily usage and conversation, perfected by generations of folk tradition.

Vemana, a people's poet in Telugu language stands in such folk tradition. This essay deals with his folk poems and discusses the sense of justice, as expressed in his verses.

## I. The Challenge of Vemana's Folk Poetry

Salt and camphor look alike  
in appearance but differ in taste,  
among people the virtuous thus differ.  
Delighter of the universe, listen Vema.<sup>1</sup>  
(*Visvadabhirama Vinura Vema*)

Virtuous deed done with pure intention  
though small does not lack;  
among seeds how big is that of banyan tree?  
Delighter of the universe, listen Vema.  
(*Visvadabhirama Vinura Vema*)

As the above two verses demonstrate, Vemana resisted the temptation of emulating the classical and the court poets who delighted in using Sanskritized Telugu language of the elite, to shower praises on the kings and in turn to be acclaimed, and rewarded richly by them. The purpose of poetry and the role of the poet is not to obtain any benefits, asserted Vemana. He composed poems not for honours, nor to please the rulers and scholars. He wrote verses for the sake of the people, for whom he was a practical philosopher and prophet. Poems of Vemana are distinctly folkloristic, rendered as they are in the language of the people (*Praja bhasha*), with words of their daily usage (*vaduka bhasha*), and in popular dialect and local Rayalaseema slang. So the verses of Vemana became the cultural heritage of the people, repeated orally by them for three centuries until they were committed to writing (first on palm leaves) from people's memory. Proverbs, idioms, similes, phrases of the common folk adorn Vemana's poems and in turn his maxims, illustrations and pithy sayings, unlike classical poetry, became popular proverbs and aphorisms among the people.

Vemana lived in the second half of seventeenth century near Cuddapah in the Rayalaseema region of Andhra Pradesh. Being

1 Translations of Vemana's poems embodied in this essay are derived from various sources. Many of them have been modified by me. Some are mine. I am grateful to these translators, though I am unable to specify them individually in each case. I must also add that I am no expert on Vemana nor is this essay a comprehensive and thorough study of Vemana's poetry. It is only illustrative in nature.



a Sudra (of farmer caste), Vemana was forbidden by the *Dharma-sastras* from being educated. (For such injustices Vemana does not spare the Dharmasastras as we shall shortly learn.) Loss of his mother in early childhood, ill-treatment by his step-mother, love-failure, weather-worn rustic farm life and unhappy married life in a broken family — all these shaped Vemana. Reduced to a scornful destitute from being a respectful farmer, he succumbed to the bids of devadasis (temple prostitutes). Betrayed by his paramour, he wandered like a prophet from village to village while associating with all sorts of people — feudal lords, traders, poets, monks, low castes. Vemana gained wisdom from his turbulent life and the experience of the people he came across.

Vemana's poems touch upon many areas of human existence and admonish appropriately various sections of people. Illustrations employed by Vemana are drawn from ordinary practical experiences of the masses and of his own. Household goods like salt and camphor, trees, birds and animals, and daily occurrences are employed by him as examples and similes to drive home his point. Vemana's poems in a lucid and succinct style crystallized the experiential knowledge of the people, their folk wisdom and spirit. The content of Vemana's poems is not heroic epics, amusing stories or poems singing the nature and its beauty. Practical wisdom drawn from life is the hallmark of his poems. They give voice to people's groanings, joys and sorrows, inner protests and yearning for justice and equality. His poems are mostly down-to-earth, concrete, practical and sound like advices of a plain rustic farmer addressed to the ordinary folk in their own vernacular medium, simple and intelligible.

The popularity of Vemana's poetry lies in its powerful satire, irony and humour<sup>2</sup>. On the heads of the ruthless rulers, miserly landlords and the hypocritical Brahmins and ascetics, Vemana heaps up burning coal. With sarcasm he attacks all sorts of humbug. Frank and forthright, fair and impartial, he wields the weapon of satire in righteous indignation to condemn boldly the exploitations of the poor and gullible people. Many examples of such outspoken candour and humour of Vemana

2 On satire in Vemana refer the essay on the subject by G. Appa Rao, *Great Poets of the People*, University of Madras, Madras 1974, pp. 35-43.

that expose the follies of people will appear soon in the next section. Folk verses of Vemana are easy to remember and repeat owing to its simple structure and brevity. All his poems consist of a set of four lines. Most of the poems ends with a common refrain, the *makuta*, the crowning line, *Vishvadabhirama Vinura Vema* (Delighter of the universe, listen Vema)<sup>3</sup>. Thus practically reduced to three lines, many of the poems contain a simile to illustrate the point made. More than 2500 such poems have been collected from the folk tradition<sup>4</sup>. The challenge of folk-poetry of Vemana has captivated the minds of contemporary revolutionary Telugu poets who strive to imitate his pattern of people's poetry.

## II. Struggle for Justice in People's Poetry of Vemana

The socio-political situation at the time of Vemana was volatile, and things were in great disarray<sup>5</sup>. It was a dark period of constant feudal wars between petty kings and of persisting poverty, famines and pestilences. In addition to these, exploitations of the people by the zamindars and navabs had no bounds. By 1570 the mighty Vijayanagar Empire had broken into three pieces with three competitors accessing a portion. During the life time of Vemana (c. 1650) battles raged between them until in 1675 the dynasty of Vijayanagar totally collapsed, succumbing to internal rivalry and external attacks from the Muslim invaders. As a strong central authority was lacking, local feudal lords and navabs let loose terror on the people not only by way of demanding exorbitant taxes but also by confiscating their lands and products of labour. Village folk had no security against

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3 There have been many translations of this refrain of Vemana. C. P. Brown, the first translator rendered it as "Listen, O Vemana, dear to the Lord of All." For a summary discussion on this see, Marupuru Kothandaramareddy, *Loka Kavi Vemana Yogi*, (Telugu), Bharati Printers, Nellore 1983, pp. 73-74 in Telugu digits. Also see the study on it by T. Venkateswara Rao, *Visvadabhirama Vinuravema*, Vemana Vikas Kendra, Vijayawada 1981.

4 For a good collection of Vemana's poems numbering about 2500 see, Pulusu Venkatasubbaiah, *Vemana Padyarathnakarma* (Telugu), Balasaraswathi Book Depot, Kurnool and Madras 1986 (1976).

5 An analysis of Vemana's background and life situation and social context is found in N. Gopi, *Vemanna Vadam*, Hyderabad Book Trust, Hyderabad 1982 (1980).

this lawlessness, chaos, plunder and anarchy. Poverty, caste inequality, and religious feuds added fuel to the fire. In such a crisis situation Vemana rose as a prophet and defended the people with the powerful weapon of his poetry.

### 1. Resistance to the vipers in power

In Vemana's opinion most of the rulers were either ruthless unjust exploiters or mean, foolhardy, unwise, extravagant prodigals. He had no respect for them and warned people not to trust them. Courageously he condemned their injustice and ridiculed their foolishness in public:

If a petty-minded person is placed in a position of authority, he will dismiss all honest workers; How can the dog that knows only the taste of the leather of a discarded shoe, know the sweetness of sugarcane?... When in the water a crocodile proudly seizes an elephant but on the ground a common dog can easily put it to shame; It is only the virtue of the position one occupies and not one's personal strength a person in authority possesses... Kings are unable to nourish the world that is mingled with earth and sky then why a king, a mere man [dons the name, 'the Lord of the Earth' (Mahipathi)?...

Cautioning the simple folk against the vile rulers and political elite Vemana says, "However much they may pretend to serve and work for people the rulers are never to be trusted; even for ten thousands association with a viper is not desirable..." Like a snake that withdraws its hood before striking, the one who wants to spoil another first makes friendship, and the king who intends to kill, first behaves leniently...

Vemana warned people not to rely on king's mercy but to cultivate their land, for the king's support would last only as long as the ball thrown in the air stands. He warns the exploiters sternly of their oppressive measures: Those who kill people in plenty, and oppress the poor and loot the villages wherever they may go, *yamudu* (god of death) will kill them. Vemana thus thought that death is the ultimate leveller. He too seemed to have held the strong belief prevalent among the folks that unjust persons would not enjoy good and normal death but would be punished by untimely and shameful end. Vemana

admonished the rulers to care for the people with the royal qualities (*Rajayogambulu*) of charity, mercy, justice, truth.

## 2. Fighting the wild-fire of poverty

Vemana protested against the economic oppression his people were subjected to. Of the treacherous consequences of poverty he was well aware: Poverty is a wild forest-fire, it mercilessly destroys not only the poor person but also the near and dear ones. It is a sin even to desire to see a person reduced to poverty. The poor have no respect in the society and no friends and relatives associated with them, Vemana points out:

Those who assert the greatness of their caste, and ancestry and those who boast of their education and knowledge are but slaves of the wealthy. Society respects the rich man even though he is of a low caste. Wealth brings greater respectability than caste, while poverty deprives the poor of their joy, social respect, dignity, self-confidence, courage, enthusiasm and education. Using wealth even a crook can earn respectability and good name.

Vemana did suggest some remedies to misery, poverty and destitution. Unlettered as he was he could not have possessed systematic analysis of the class divisions and economic structures operating in the feudal society of his time. Yet he did advance some valuable solutions to people's plight. He exhorted them not to believe in fate and superstitions but realize that wealth is the product of labour: It is from the earth that its resources originate; it is from the mind that philosophy is born and it is from human labour that everything is obtained... He reminded the rich of the naked truth of reality: If someone claims the Earth as his own, the earth would laugh at him. "Wealth" also laughs at one who claims it all for himself. Finally, "Time" will have the last laugh at these cowards. Hence the rich must generously share with the poor. It is of no avail to supply food and clothes when a person is dead as it is being performed in ceremonies for the deceased. Instead of distributing gifts to the rich, it is right and just to give them to the poorest and weakest irrespective of their caste or creed. Cruel are those who forget, as they feast, those who have toiled daily to make them wealthy. Be they foes or friends, good or bad, belonging to caste or untouchables, the hungry must be fed without discrimination and without delay.



Accumulators of wealth who neither give in charity nor enjoy it themselves are like the bees who collect the honey in the comb and leave it for others to enjoy. Through such sarcastic verses Vemana condemns harshly the behaviour of rich misers and hoarders of wealth who let the poor suffer while they fill up their store houses. He advises the rich to marry poor persons. His righteous anger was directed towards those who threw away their possessions to the prostitutes to quench their carnal passions while refusing to give a handful of rice to those dying of hunger. With keen foresight he observed, "If a few rich persons live lives of luxury while millions suffer for want of food and clothing, there will be discontent in society. Realizing that this discontent will lead to anarchy the rich must act generously towards the poor". The unjust rich did not heed to the prophetic denunciations and warnings of Vemana. His powerful poems failed to persuade the heartless elite, and as an ultimatum he calls the people to "seize the wealth from the wealthy, through violence if need be, and distribute it among the poor". Revolutionary indeed, for his times !

### 3. Protest against dehumanizing caste system

People's poetry envisions an egalitarian society without caste discrimination. Vemana's folk verse is no exception to this, for as a Sudra Vemana did experience insult and humiliation. Rebelling against the assertion of caste supremacy by the Brahmins and high castes, Vemana puts forth arguments to usher in a counter-culture:

There is no need for fighting over castes as being high or low. Since all the castes are born from human flesh (body), there can be no motive to assert high or low. Some people insult others and are arrogant about their caste-belonging. Since whoever is born is born on the dirt of the earth, what can be special about having a caste or claiming to belong to the twice-born. A casteless untouchable person becomes respectable by wealth while a high caste poor person is considered low. Wealth is of more importance than caste.

Lashing out against those who insult the untouchables, Vemana challenges them; Even those whom you constantly harass as impure (*mala*) have the same flesh in the body just like you; can you point out the caste on their body?...

Vemana holds that it is the character and behaviour that makes a person pure and not one's caste: An untouchable is not impure at birth on earth. It is one who fails to keep his word who is to be considered impure. And those who call others 'impure' (*mala*) are themselves the most impure of all. On the basis of their food habits some castes deem others lower than themselves. Observing this silly practice among the so-called higher castes Vemana raises a few pertinent queries.

The untouchables eat meat while others eat ghee, both become fat in the body. So ultimately is there not only one caste in existence?... Some high caste people eat only pigs and fowls which feed on dirt and shit, while the untouchables eat cows and buffalos which survive on clean grass. Hence who is to be considered impure?... On touching the 'impure' untouchables, caste people bathe in murky, dirty waters to ward off the impurity. By their dirty deed they really become impure. But these human-beasts (*narapasuvulu*) do not realize this.

Vemana invites all castes to establish an egalitarian society by bidding good-bye to caste differences and inviting them to share meals from one common plate: "Universal brotherhood should be established by making all human beings eat out of one plate. Caste distinctions must be eradicated. Every man should swear never to observe caste differences."

#### 4. Condemnation of exploitative and hypocritical religion

Exploitation of people in the name of God and religion was severe in the time of Vemana. Superstitions were rampant. Pilgrimages, ceremonies, sacrifices were held in competition with each other by the Vaisnavaites and the Saivaites. Bitter feuds raged between them resulting in the loss of many human lives and hardships to people. Islam, with the consolidation of Muslim invaders, also entered this crazy race of religions in Rayalaseema. Virasaivism, a new sect was becoming highly popular. People were being trampled under the feet of these sects. This situation aroused the indignation of Vemana who heaped his wrath on these religious oppressors and attempted to save the innocent victims.

Due to his virulent attack on the Brahmins and the religious elites, the gurus and sanyasis, Vemana earned their hatred. No wonder that they conspired to suppress his poems from being published. In 1829 C. P. Brown ordered five hundred copies of his collection of Vemana's poems to be printed<sup>6</sup>. Only 50 copies were given to him as editor's copies, and the rest mysteriously disappeared. Thus the first attempt to publish Vemana's poems was sabotaged. For a long period of time, editors of Telugu school text books failed to include his poems. Brahminic compilers of Telugu literary history blacked out the name of Vemana from their books<sup>7</sup>. But for the untiring efforts of the Western scholars, the world would have missed the folk verses of Vemana<sup>8</sup>.

Vemana fearlessly revolted against the religious practices and customs perpetuated by the Brahmin priests and pundits which brought people no merit but added to their expenditure and woe. He challenged the superstitious beliefs of people regarding good or bad omens attributed to the birds and lizards and other animals. In spite of many pundits' forecasting auspicious time, works undertaken during this specified time miserably failed, he observed. Vemana was not only a non-conformist, but also a religious rebel. He ridiculed pilgrimages, sacrifices, ceremonies, idol worship and other religious practices:

If salvation can be attained by frequent baths, all fishes must be saved. If donning ashes is meritorious, well, many asses too wallow in ashes. Can vegetarianism sanctify the bodies? Then goats definitely can score over human beings... You feed crows to worship your ancestors, how can crows that eat shit represent your ancestors? Those who fast shall become pigs in the next birth, those who embrace poverty shall become beggars and those who bow down and worship a stone idol shall become lifeless images...

Vemana did not stop there. Radical as he was he attacked the root causes of religious exploitation, the Vedas,

6 The original title of C. P. Brown's translations of Vemana was *The Verses of Vemana: Moral, Religious and Satirical*, presently available as *Verses of Vemana*, Asian Educational Service, New Delhi 1986.

7 Concerning the conspiracy to suppress Vemana's works [see, V. R. Narla, *Vemana*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi 1969.

8 See V. R. Narla, *Vemana through Western Eyes*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi 1969.

Dharmasastras, Puranas and the gods and goddesses. He held that Vedas are wholly unintelligible and like courtesans they delude people. He disparaged the epic Mahabharata as "a pack of lies" and opined that *Nyaya Sastras* teach injustice, *Dharma Sastras* preach immorality and astrology misdirects and leads people to misbehaviour and bad conduct.

There is no foolish king like Rama who imagined there could be a golden deer... Vemana does not spare Krishna either: The Lord who sprang forth from the milk-sea, how come he desired for the milk from the shepherdfolk homes?... Many other gods also fail to stand the critical tests of Vemana<sup>9</sup>.

Vemana advocated a religion of interiority and morality. External acts of piety and religious practices were belittled by him because they failed to effect internal change and yet afforded people self-justification. He mocks at the fools who carry stones from the hills, knock them about in their hands and feet, shape them with chisels and finally worship them as temples and gods. "Did god ask you for the decorations on stone images, temples and towers (*gopuram*), food and clothing"?... queries Vemana. He chides them for worshipping the bull in stone while starving and ill-treating the living bull, and for not recognizing the God abiding in the humans (*jiva*) while worshipping him in the stones... Vemana insists on the change of heart and shows the inability of mere asceticism and pilgrimages to effect the same: Those who torture the body and call themselves saints can never cleanse the foulness of the heart. Does a snake die when you beat the anthill in which it hides? No dog will turn into a lion nor a pig become an elephant by going to Kasi (Varanasi). No pilgrim will become a saint if he does not change his character. No acts of piety and devotion are meaningful and valid unless they are executed with a clean heart and pure mind, reiterates Vemana in many poems: How can wholesome food be prepared in a filthy vessel?... How can we deem a person pious if he lacks a good character?...

Vemana describes the true religious conduct of an ideal holy person, and it consists of the following: "He who does

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9 For similar comments of Vemana on other gods see, M. Kothandaramareddy, *Loka Kavi Vemana Yogi, op. cit.*, pp. 109-110 in Telugu digits.



not swerve from his own religion, he who does not revile the creed of another man, one who cautiously refrains from forming any evil desire will live in happiness. He is the first and the best of men''.

### Conclusion: Humanism in folklore

The greatest person is one who cares for the orphan, observed Vemana. He reminds people to sympathize with the suffering humanity.... one who does not know the difficulties of others is a mean person... Only the person who feels the sufferings of others as his own is really alive as a 'living' person in the world; that person is the greatest being... Vemana means that others have lost their humanity and so are dead and useless to the people. Vemana's poems reveal that the spirit of humanism consists in solidarity with the weak, the suffering, the orphans, the poor and the outcastes in the society and valuing the welfare of humans above one's possessions, profit, prestige, pleasures and everything else. Out of such a spirit of humanism spring the sense of justice (*niti*), righteousness (*dharma*), service (*seva*) and generous giving (*dana*). We cease to be humans when we stop struggling for justice. Vemana's folk verse and folklore in general, hold up this challenge before us. And they remain a powerful critique of present day elitist, consumerist and dehumanized society.

# The Challenge of Folklore to Indian Theologizing

## Some Preliminary Reflections

This article explores how an encounter of theology with the world of folklore can help to fulfill its (theology's) task. The quest for justice is placed within this overall approach. Interpreting the theological task in relation to the marginalized of our Indian society, the article brings out the change folklore can effect in theological methodology, in the understanding of the Bible, in hermeneutics, in the critical function of theology and in the development of contextual categories. The essay concludes calling for a change in pastoral praxis, flowing from the encounter of theology with folklore.

India is a country of immense folklore. With its variegated ethnic, linguistic and cultural richness, and its ever fertile imagination, India peaks in folk creativity, bringing forth innumerable expressive forms. At a time when we try to develop an Indian theology in encounter with the culture and history of our peoples, nothing could be more beneficial than to make an approach to theologizing through the rich mine of folklore. It is this conviction which prompted me to undertake the modest attempt of making a few preliminary and tentative reflections in this line.

Here I must immediately add a note of caution. Folklore can be and is made use of to promote vested interests — from promotion of market and tourism to the propagation of ideologies. In these cases, it is a question of exploiting and instrumentalizing of folklore. When I speak of theology in relation to folklore, it is not *to make use of folklore*. For folklore is a system by itself with its own internal dynamics; it has its own legitimate autonomy which should be respected.<sup>1</sup> Here theology is brought

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1 I have given a basic description of what is folklore in the editorial to this issue of *Jeevadhara*, which need not be repeated here. Other elements and characteristics of folklore will be clear from the following reflections.

in relation to folklore, so that it (theology) may learn from the world of experience to which folklore refers, and meet the challenges it presents.

## 1. The Impact of Folklore on the Manner Theology is Pursued

All theology needs to be experience-based. If theology is to be pursued with a clear preferential option for the poor, the down-trodden and the marginalized, then, this stance also indicates and specifies the nature of experience which theology should have as its base: It is primarily the experience of the marginal people and groups. If there is one place where the experience of these sections of people, their perception of the world and themselves are vividly present and readily available, it is the world of folklore.

### Folklore and the classical

Folklore (*desi*) differs from the classical (*marga*).<sup>2</sup> However it would be simplistic to draw a sharp contrast between the two realms, and see them as two polarities. For, there is a certain inter-relationship and communication between the two spheres, and it is here that we have to identify the specificity of the folklore and the experience it embodies. We can note two processes at work: On the one hand, there is the process by which elements from the classical are adopted by the folk, and on the other, there is the process by which what was once an element of folk experience, history or worship is taken over and made part of the classical realm.<sup>3</sup> It is to be noted that in both cases

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For an overall survey of folklore, cfr. Alan Dundes, *Essays in Folklore, Theory and Method*, Cre-A, Madras 1990; Dan Ben-Amos, *Folklore in Context. Essays*, South Asian Publishers, New Delhi-Madras, 1982; George H. Schoemaker (ed.), *The Emergence of Folklore in Everyday Life*, Trickster Press, Bloomington Press, Indiana; Richard Baumann, "Folklore" in *International Encyclopedia of Communications*, vol. 2, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1989; B. B. Kumar, *Folklore and Folklore Motifs*, Omson Publications, Delhi 1993 (It contains extensive literature on the folklore of the tribals of North East India); cfr. also Indra Deva, *Folk Culture and Peasant Society*, Rawat, Jaipur 1989.

2 'Classical' and 'folklore' in some respects would correspond to *marga* and *desi*. Cfr. A. K. Ramanujan, "The Relevance of South Asian Folklore", in Peter J. Claus, J. Handoo and D. P. Pattanayak (eds), *Indian Folklore II*, Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore 1987. pp. 79-156.

3 Cfr. Lawrence A. Babb, *The Divine Hierarchy: Popular Hinduism in Central*

it is the *folk* that remains the *subject*: In the former case, they play the role of *interpreting and transforming* the classical in keeping with their experience-base, and in the latter, they remain the *original creators* of elements and forms which in the course of time pass on to the classical realm. Though folklore may have both these dimensions, however, it is the experience and interpretation of the people which remains as its foundation and base.

### Immediacy and complexity

Certain characteristic traits of the experience of the people as it reveals itself in the folklore are a great stimulus for theologizing. First of all, we are struck by the immediacy, transparency and candour of folk experience which the classical does not possess.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the traditional theology too would belong to the classical realm. Here there is distancing from experience through the process of abstraction, whereas folklore leads us to the heart of the experience of the people.

The alien and alienating abstraction from the concrete world of day to day life as people experience and perceive it, has an inherent tendency of idealization and moralization. In the classics there is almost an urge to create figures and protagonists who are all chaste and pure — as Sita in Ramayana for example — untainted by the vicissitudes of life and the earthly admixture of good and evil. The partial perception of reality through abstraction, idealization, control and restraint is as well a distortion of experience (overt or covert). Over against this, folklore places before us a certain perspective of wholeness and realism. It enables us to see the aspect of human passion, rage, anger and release of energy, which all make up the world of concrete life-experience. "Folklore", as A. K. Ramanujan notes, "is full of ingenious, promiscuous betrayers of the ideal. In legend women saints break every rule in Manu's code-book, disobey husbands,

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India, Columbia University Press, New York-London 1975; McKim Marriott, "Little Communities in Indigenous Civilization" in *Village India*, Chicago-London 1972, pp. 171-221; cfr. also Guenther D. Sontheimer - Herman Kulke (eds), *Hinduism Reconsidered*, Manohar 1991.

4 This however does not mean that folklore is something simple. On the contrary it is not easy to explain and interpret the folklore forms as they encompass many layers of reality — human, social, artistic, psychological, psycho-analytical, therapeutic etc.



take on divine liaison...".<sup>5</sup> And with reference to the Tamil story Kannaki, he goes on to add :

"The Story is often seen as a story about the power of chastity, equated with *tapas* 'burning' in its pent-up fires of self-control and in its tendency to start conflagrations. But the excess of rage, the power of an ordinary woman to become a goddess given a sufficient charge of anger, seems to me to belong to the potent underlying folk-pattern. It is also as much a theory of emotion as a theology."<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, there is a theology in it, different from what we are used to. For, theology tends to impose too quickly on human experience certain categories, and does not sufficiently listen to the voice of reality in its totality. One such case is the haste with which all reality and experience is assorted in terms of good and evil. The human experience as it reveals itself in folklore is a mixture of the ideal and the real, of seriousness and *lila* — play or game, of irony and humour. It is full of ambivalence, as real human life and history in fact is. Moreover, the category of evil is a distilled moral abstraction which theology tends to make, whereas in real life evil is experienced by the poor and the oppressed as *suffering*, something that comes out forcefully in folk stories and ballads. Theology stands challenged by folklore to focus itself on suffering, specially as experienced by the folk in their day to day experience.

### Different experience of time and space

There is still another rich element of human experience to which folklore draws the attention of theology, namely a different conception of time and space. Time does not become something that interrupts human experience. Rather time intermingles with human experience and dances with it. It is enough to watch the performance of *villupattu* (bow song) in Tamilnadu or *theyyam* in Kerala to have an idea of what is meant by this. Time is not a regulator of human experience, and therefore experience is not subjected to its measurement. Time, in a way, ceases to exist and becomes one with the performance. This should caution theology against the prevalent trend of inflating the category of time and history. (More about it later.)

5 A. K. Ramanujan, "The Relevance of South Asian Folklore", in Peter J. Claus, J. Handoo & D. P. Pattanayak (eds), *Indian Folklore II*, op. cit. p. 82

6 *Ibid.* p. 135.

As for space, in several folklore forms, it does not impose itself. There is no division of space in terms of sacred and profane. Space becomes the creation of the people. Theyyam, for example, does not require any pre-ordained space. It could take place anywhere. In other cases, the sacredness of the space is filled by the intensity of the experience of the people who celebrate, and no space is subsumed for ever from the life of the people and sacralized for ever.

### Wholism

If theology has, unfortunately, isolated itself from the life-stream of the people, one reason is the dichotomy that has crept into it due to historical reasons. The main dichotomies are between body and soul, the sacred and the profane. Folklore can help theology to overcome such dichotomizing tendencies. In fact, several folk forms offer a wholistic perspective and approach to life. To take an example, in the realm of healing, Indian folk tradition could never think of a separation regarding a therapeutic method applied to body and soul separately. Healing is a total process involving the whole person, and this is evidenced most clearly by the folk-healing methods and rituals which abound in our country.<sup>7</sup> Here the sacred is not something away from the profane; they are interpenetrating dimensions of the same reality, and that makes it impossible to dissociate one from the other. A clear exemplification of this truth is the case of Tamil Siddhas who combined the therapeutic practice, understood as an organic whole, with the religious and social dimensions of life.

In short, if theology is to be based on experience, it should then learn the richness and dimensions of this experience as refracted in the folklore. And this experience implies some fundamental things: It goes beyond all dichotomies, beyond the categories of good and evil, the sacred and the profane; it draws our attention to the reality of suffering and oppression.

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7 Cfr. Sudhir Kakar, *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors. A Psychological Inquiry into India and its Healing Traditions*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1992; Frederique Apffel Marglin, "Smallpox in Two Systems of Knowledge", in F. A. Marglin and S. A. Marglin (eds), *Dominating Knowledge. Development, Culture and Resistance*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1970, pp. 102-144

## II. Bible from a Folklore Perspective

Since theology is experience-based in its genesis and transformation-oriented in its scope, the sources it uses and the way they are employed should correspond to its origin, nature and goal. I do not intend to enter into any detailed discussion of the various sources of theology. Here I simply want to reflect, by way of example, on one of the chief sources of theologizing — the Christian Scriptures which present to us the experience of Israelites and the primitive Christian community as they lived and interacted among themselves, with the society around and as they encountered God in and through their world of experience.

Bible and the experiences it has recorded can be viewed from different perspectives — as history, as literature, as didactic means etc. I suggest that we look at the Bible also from a folklore perspective, and this perspective has a lot to offer for the pursuit of theologizing.

### Experience of the afflicted and their expressive forms

To be able to approach Bible from a folklore perspective, we need to keep two things in mind: First, in the Bible there is an inextricable unity between the day to day experience of the people and their experience of God. Secondly, the foundational experience of the Bible — the exodus event — is not experience of any kind; it is the experience of a people subjugated, oppressed and marginalized, and their struggle for freedom and liberation in and through which their encounter with God takes place. The experience of the people is then marked by powerlessness which would remain their characteristic feature and would colour their expressive forms. And many of these folk expressive forms — folklore — echo their affliction as well as their wisdom deriving from deep insights into life tested on the anvil of trials and tribulations. Many of these folk forms, orally treasured and transmitted have passed on into the Bible and has become one with it.

“Crying”, weeping and “groaning”, for example, is the expression of helplessness. It is often the only language the poor have at their disposal in their situation of powerlessness. And that is the language the Israelites were employing when

they were discriminated against and oppressed in Egypt. (Ex. 2: 23-24; 3:7; 22:23) Crying and weeping as expression of grief marks also the occasion caused by death and destruction. In Indian villages, the mourning is expressed through songs by professional mourners, composed mostly at the spot and spontaneously. Such songs express the greatness of the deceased person, what he has been to the dear ones, the sorrow filling the heart as a result of his departure etc. Such mourning, which is very much a folklore form, can be seen in the Bible employed by prophet Jeremiah as *lamentations* over the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B. C. These lamentations portray the grief of a people whose country was devastated, their kith and kin brutally killed, scattered or deported to an alien land. We have also the funeral lament of Amos for Israel (Amos 5:1-2).

In traditional India as in Biblical folk tradition, the mourning and lamentation has ritual overtones, and hence the place of professional mourners who shed tears (which is also ritual) and beat their breast. The prophetic lamentation is but adaptation of the funeral elegies for a dead person, the most clear example of which is the one sung by David for Saul and Jonathan (II Sam. 1: 17-27).

### Folk genres

Then there is the whole fund of folk wisdom in the form of aphorism, proverbs, riddles etc. which all have been absorbed and incorporated in the Biblical literature. Traces of it can be clearly seen in the Biblical narratives and in the words of the prophets. To cite an example, the Book of Ezekiel is citing a folk proverb when it says "the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Ezek. 18:2). From their experience with the environment — trees, animals, birds etc. people create fables. The book of Judges speak to us about the fable of the trees which wanted a King and how they went about it (Judges 9:8-15). The Song of Songs, for more than one reason, reminds us of the folk poems of love; for example, the candour with which love is expressed and the seriousness with which love and sex are approached as a central human experience<sup>8</sup>.

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8 For an excellent comparative study of Song of Songs and traditional Tamil folk love poems, cfr. Abraham Mariaselvam, *The Song of Songs and Ancient*



Folk story is another important folklore genre, and it plays an important role in the culture of a people. The story of Jonah for example has a lot of folkloristic character. Scholars differ in characterizing the story of Jonah, some viewing it as a parable with a didactic purpose, others as allegory and still others as history. Whichever be the case, its folklore character is difficult to deny. Even assuming a historical core, this fact need not contradict its folklore character. For, in India there are numerous folk stories built around a historical nucleus. Besides, the motif of a person being swallowed by fish and being rescued appears to be part of folk narratives among many peoples. The book of Job is reminiscent of folklore drama genre when through dialogue and discourses, the problem of suffering in all its nakedness and gravity is faced.

### Jesus and folklore

Folklore seems to characterize also the Gospel accounts and narratives. Immersed as he was among the rustic masses, the simple, unlettered and powerless "little ones", Jesus could not be impervious to the folklore of the people whose life he shared. On the contrary, he knew too well the folk expressive forms and cherished them. We find him employing, for example, folk proverbs as when he says, "doubtless, you will quote to me this proverb, 'physician cure thyself' " (Lk 4:23). How deeply Jesus was immersed in the folklore of the people can be seen from his reference to children's games which is also a folklore genre: "To what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market places and calling to their playmates, 'we piped to you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn' " (Mt 11:17).

Now what is striking is that the parables and miracles of Jesus, which form the central part of the Gospels, appear to have strong folkloristic characteristics both in terms of their form and mode of transmission. Without going into the question of the interrelationship between the Rabbinic parables and the parables of Jesus<sup>9</sup>, I want only to stress here the presence of folklore

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*Tamil Love Poems. Poetry and Symbolism*, Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, Rome 1988.

9 Cfr. Bard H. Young, *Jesus and His Jewish Parables. Rediscovering the Roots of Jesus' Teaching*, Paulist Press, New York 1989.

forms in Jesus' parables. Riddles are common folklore form and we find some of the parables of Jesus resembling riddles calling for solution. The parable of the Good Samaritan would be another folklore form of fictitious story (different from fairy tales) imbued with a lot of realism, with reference to actual geographical locations (Jerusalem, Jericho), and with actual social actors (priest, levite, samaritan etc.).

Folklore character is revealed also in the interaction between the narrator and the audience. Many folklore forms (unlike the modern mass media) involve the participation of the audience, and there is a kind of performance-community made up of the narrator and the audience. In fact, when Jesus performs by narrating a story or parable, there is resonance and response from his audience. It does not leave his listeners passive. His narrative involves them actively in what he performs. The use of common folk story motives as the wise and the foolish, rich fool, bride's maids, unjust judge etc. shows Jesus' deep rootedness in the Palestinian folklore tradition. A similar reflection can be made about miracle stories from a folklore point of view. Space does not permit me to do that here.

### Oral transmission - a folklore means

Bible mediates its experience in terms of folklore, not only in what concerns the form, but in the *mode of transmission* as well. This is clear from the fact that much of the Biblical material, and specially the Gospels, belonged to oral tradition. Oral tradition and transmission is what characterizes the verbal forms of folklore, even though it may find written expression.<sup>10</sup> But the written text recedes to the background and the oral transmission endows the folklore with a quality that cannot be matched by its literary textual form. It is precisely as oral transmission, the folklore item is open to variations. In a written text these variations will be considered as something negative and termed as interpolations or distortions. On the other hand, variation is almost the rule in oral transmission which enriches and embellishes it, offers multiple perspectives and enables a pluralist approach. These variations are occasioned and

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10 The verbal folklore forms like folk songs, ballads, folk music, folk stories, proverbs, riddles etc. are transmitted orally. There are also non-verbal forms of folklore as for example, dance, games, folk art, folk festival etc.

determined by the group to whom it is narrated or performed and by the difference of narrators. And therefore every version, variation and deflection carries with it, its own audience, its own narrator.

Starting from the account about the creation of man (about which there are two written accounts in Gen. 1:26-27; 2:7), to the transmission of Jesus' parables and miracles, what we find is that the different versions indicate difference in the audience and the narrators in the context of oral transmission. Many episodes and stories are presented in more than one version. The four Gospels themselves in their written form are the most clear reflection of the difference of versions as in a folklore item. In the transmission of parables or miracle stories these variations are very evident. In the narration of the miracle of the multiplication of loaves, the differences in oral tradition are so much that it is difficult to conclude whether they refer to one and the same event or two different events.

### III. Folklore and Hermeneutics in Theology

What we have tried to reflect in terms of the method of theologizing based on folklore-experience and the many characteristics which Biblical narratives share with folklore, specially its character of having been primarily an oral tradition, lead us to examine the implications of all this for hermeneutics.

#### A necessary shift

The Western theological (and philosophical) hermeneutical tradition has been centered very much on the *written text*, and to a lesser extent on *events*.<sup>11</sup> And that exactly corresponds to its theological moorings wherein the word as expression of mind, production of reason, and event as history (mediated through the text) have come to occupy pride of place. Folklore offers a fresh avenue of hermeneutics that is in keeping with our own experience in India as well as with the nature of the Biblical tradition both of which cannot be interpreted through the above dominant categories — word as text and event as history. The

11 For a general survey of the development of theological and Biblical hermeneutics in the West, cfr. Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics. Development and Significance*, Crossroad, New York 1991; Robert M. Grant with David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1984.

experiential content of our culture and society, as well as that of Biblical revelation goes beyond these realms and categories and calls for a different framework and tools of hermeneutical interpretation.

We know that the allegorical interpretation dominant in the early centuries, gave place to a more critical hermeneutical tradition. With the advent of modern historical consciousness and its influence in theology and Biblical studies, attention was shifted to the study of the historical and cultural context, and in more recent times, to the socio-political context. But all these studies about context have remained studies about *contexts of written texts*.

One of the stimulating things about folklore is that its various items are context-sensitive. But there is a difference. The contextuality in the case of folklore is something basically related to an *oral tradition*, whereas the context the modern Western hermeneutical tradition refers to is that of a *written text*. As for the Gospels, and the Bible in general, the fact that they have been committed to writing does not do away with the original oral character of transmission of their contents. And this fact has a lot to say about the way of doing hermeneutics.

### Performance character

Many of the folklore forms such as narratives, stories, ballads, dramas, apart from their content or textual or script form, have, as oral tradition, a performance character. By performance is meant, "the delivery and stylization of a story within a context; it tells not "what" but "how"... Performance, in other words, is what happens to a text in a context."<sup>12</sup> For example, in a folk drama, one thing is the playscript and another thing is the rendition of it as a performance act, a drama. To take another example, the bow songs (*villupattu*) performed during temple festivals in Tamilnadu and in some parts of Kerala, have a text about the story of a deity. But it is a different thing when the story is rendered as a music performance.

Even the evoking of a proverb at a particular context could be a performance. For, as for the text of the proverb goes, there are proverbs contradicting one another in terms of their contents.

12 Stuart H. Blackburn and A. K. Ramanujan, *Another Harmony. New Essays on the Folklore of India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1986, p. 168.



However, the evoking of a particular proverb (performing) in a determined context interprets it. Out of context, the proverb may not say anything significant. So too, some of the folk items such as folk dance require a ritual context for their interpretation independent of what the text may say. Performance context is very fundamental to certain folklore items such as discourse, folk tale, folk drama, folk dance. The bow song, for example, is performed during three days on the occasion of *kotai* festival in the local temple narrating the story and vicissitudes of the deity<sup>13</sup>.

"Every folk-text, even a verbal one like a proverb, is a performance. One should not be too quick to "rescue the said from the saying", but dwell on the saying in its oneness with the said, before we extract the latter. This is, of course, best done in the original language and in performance"<sup>14</sup>.

### Implications for the marginalized

From what has been said about folklore hermeneutics, it is easy to see the implications of it for the development of Indian theology: The cherished possession of two of our most oppressed groups in India — the dalits and the tribals — is their oral tradition and their rich fund of folk stories, proverbs, narratives etc. Their folklore is endowed with remarkable performative character. In the case of dalits, we should remember that the literary culture — reading and writing — was forcibly denied to them by a society in which the upper caste retained the monopoly of written word and text. Therefore oral tradition is not simply a question of mode of communication. It has a deep, human, cultural and social significance, as it symbolizes the dignity and selfhood of the lowly and the marginalized. Against this background, the mediation between the Gospel narratives, seen primarily as oral tradition (which subsequently came to be also committed to writing), and the oral traditions of the marginalized groups can be much more easily effected than when an oral tradition confronts the Gospels primarily as a written text.

13 Cfr. Stuart Blackburn, "Performance as Paradigm: A Rhythm in a Tamil Oral Tradition", in Peter J. Claus, J. Handoo and D. P. Pattanayak (eds), *Indian Folklore II*, op. cit. pp. 157-209.

14 A. K. Ramanujan, "The Relevance of South Asian Folklore" in *Indian Folklore*, op. cit. p. 85.

In the light of what I have tried to say on the performative character of the folklore, the encounter between the oral tradition of the Gospels and the oral traditions of the marginalized should be sufficiently clear. The traditional as well as contemporary theological hermeneutics, centered as it is mainly on the word, text, history etc., has not paid attention to the role of performance in interpretation. And yet, in India the daily life of the people is not regulated and ordered so much by texts as by performance — narrating of stories, performing of rituals, recitations, ceremonies and festivals<sup>15</sup>. And this is strongest in the folk tradition. On the other hand, the Bible too, as it contains a lot of folklore items, manifests a lot of performance features without reference to which it cannot be comprehended and interpreted even in its original context.

With regard to Biblical tradition, in particular, we should note that the interpretation of it would remain partial and inadequate as long as its contents are treated as texts. Biblical narratives acquire their fullness when they become performance today. For example, the parable of the Good Samaritan is not interpreted by simply extracting its meaning; by placing this story against the social background of the times. Jesus' *act of narrating* this fictitious story at a particular context to his audience — his *performance in context* (not simply text in context) — is also essential for its interpretation. If so, today this parable cannot be interpreted by treating it simply as a text. Narrating it (performing) in India to a particular audience in a particular context is to interpret this parable whose richness goes far beyond a textual analysis and interpretation of the story.

This context-sensitive and performance-centered interpretation implies a pluralism, a rich variety of interpretations, which, as I noted earlier, is characteristic of oral tradition and folklore items. After all, the variations we find in the Gospels about the same parable or miracle story themselves are in fact interpretations in particular performance contexts of the primitive Church. Depending upon to which community the parable is narrated, there results a different interpretation. A clear example is the case of the parable of the sower (Mk 4:3-8; Mt 13:3-8; Lk 8:5-8). If the Bible is seen basically as a text, the interpretations

15 Cfr. Milton Singer, *When a Great Tradition modernizes*, New York 1970.

are over with these versions on which we have only to do exegetical studies. But if we look at the narratives of the Gospels and Bible as oral tradition with a written version, then, there is an infinite possibility of rich and varied interpretations in ever new performance contexts.

In short, in India we need to explore a theological hermeneutics based on the oral tradition of the marginalized and the performance perspective closely linked to it. And we have strong support for such a hermeneutics in the Indian as well as Biblical tradition.

#### IV. Folklore and Critical Function of Theology

##### Reason and imagination

It is obvious that theology has a critical role to play. Traditionally the critical function in general was assigned to reason. In the theological tradition too, therefore, the critical function was very much related to its association with logic and philosophical reasoning. In modern times, the critical element has been exercised through the social mediation: a rational analysis of the working of the society. But the folklore takes us to another plane of critique — a critique not so much centered on reason as flowing from *imagination*.

The element of imagination, fiction, is very conspicuous in folklore forms. We should rightly understand the role of imagination in the folklore. It is not simply a flight of fancy meant for entertainment. The imagination in most folk-forms begins from day to day experience and they return back to the experience. The critical element is often interwoven in the creation and performance of folklore items and the development of certain motifs and forms through the power of imagination.

##### Overcoming unidirectional communication

In a society of unequal groups, castes and classes, there is a top-heavy communication. The marginalized are the receivers of communication from above in the form of ideologies, doctrines, laws and prescriptions. Certain folklore items in their form, structure and performance break through this unidirectional communication, and establish a communication from the other direction — from the lower strata of the society upwards. Some

of the folklore forms are shot through sarcasm and irony about the upper castes and classes and the prevailing order of the society. Besides, for the marginalized and oppressed groups, the very fact of possessing their own stories and folklore and being attached to them is itself a critique of what is transmitted from above. In fact, folklore is an area where the marginalized spin stories about their origin and present status — and these have different motifs and tenor than the discriminatory ideological explanations of the upper castes and classes. This can be seen very clearly in the case of the dalits and their folk stories.

### Reversal and inversion

The critical dimension in folklore comes out also through the motifs at work in its various items. One recurrent motif of folk stories, ballads and dramas is the *reversal* of the order and inversion of roles. The folk projects through its utopian imagination a change in the present state of things. This is very much close to certain parables of Jesus — “the reversal parables”<sup>16</sup> in which the last becomes the first; the ones occupying the first seats at a wedding banquet are shown the last place. In the parable of the workers in the vineyard, those who came last are paid first and equal to others. Other vivid examples of reversal of position are the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31), the Pharisee and the Publican (Lk 18:10-14), the younger brother and elder one in the parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32).

This reversal motif which is a powerful critique through imagination, gets sharpened by stories and narrations in which the lowly, the marginalized and the powerless become victorious over the giant, the colossal, the privileged and the powerful. There is a miraculous, out of the ordinary element as how this change takes place. But it is important to take note of the projection of something different, an alternative to the present in popular imagination.

### Justice motif in folklore

It is against these motifs that we should approach the question of justice as it comes across in the folklore. As I noted earlier, though the folk employ very much their creative imagination,

16 Cfr. John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables. The Challenges of the Historical Jesus*, Harper & Row, New York 1985.



yet this imagination is very much experience-bound. There is the deep awareness about the tragic reality of suffering being inflicted on the weak and the marginalized. The folk motifs in some of their stories start from the reality of someone victimized and done to death. But this person establishes justice by revenge and is deified. Here the important thing is not so much the mode in which justice is established (revenge) as the underlying conviction that injustice cannot go scot free, unchallenged and unquestioned. "Violation-death-deification-revenge" constitutes a recurrent theme of folklore stories in Tamilnadu.<sup>17</sup> A number of local deities (*amman* in the case of women, and *madan* in the case of men) are in fact people who suffered and underwent death, and came to re-establish justice.

Often the themes of the story relate to violation of caste codes and social interdictions like a dalit getting married to a high caste partner, or the envy about the rise of a lower caste person through his or her talents and the plotting and killing of him or her. Let me cite here three examples from the Tamil ballads gathered and published recently from old palm leaves.<sup>18</sup> The story of *Cinnathampi*, a cobbler, narrates the story of his meteoric rise through his extraordinary talents and the plotting and killing of him by the jealous upper caste men. But the hero of the story, Cinnathampi avenges this injustice and is deified by the folk. As the publishers of this ballad note, "it is a brilliant product of folk creativity — a spontaneous creative outburst of a non-industrialized unsophisticated society. Replete with folk motifs, formulas and archetypes, the ballad is the monument of a crumbling social order and a call, albeit a feeble one, for ushering in a new society".<sup>19</sup> The other two ballads, the story of *Uciini Makaliyamman*, and the story of *Kurukulanci* too have a tragic note of injustice suffered in a society where the poor and the outcastes are at the receiving end.

### Theology and alternatives

The critical element contained in the above folk forms are very instructive for theology. In a country like India with

17 Cfr. *Another Harmony. New Essays on the Folklore of India*, op. cit., pp. 167ff.

18 *The Wandering Voice. Three Ballads from Palm-leaf Manuscripts*, Institute of Asian Studies, Madras 1987.

19 *Ibid.* p. viii.

its immense lore of myths and folk stories and ballads bearing on the experience of life, reason and logic alone cannot be the instrument of critique for theology. We need to acknowledge the role of imagination as it comes through the folklore. Imagination is a great aid in the task of theologizing. But we should be also aware of the serious implications of this in theologizing. For, the powerful invariably claim to be on the side of the reason and thus justify their stand, and the role of imagination is suppressed for fear of the challenge, threat it can pose by projecting alternatives, different modes of thought and praxis. Theologies created from above are no exception to this process as the history of the Church will easily demonstrate. To take an example from secular history, in the nineteenth century Europe, with its faith in reason, industrialization, technology etc. one trivialized and even suppressed fairy tales and folk tales as belonging to a low and primitive tradition. As Jacob Zipes rightly notes in this regard,

“the emphasis on play, alternative forms of living, pursuing dreams and day dreams, experimentation, striving for golden age — this stuff of which fairy tales were (and are) made challenged the rationalistic purpose and regimentation of life to produce for profit and expansion of capitalistic industry... In the early stages of capitalism, the imagination had to be fought and curbed in all cultural levels”.<sup>20</sup>

If theology is a service, as it should be, to create a new order of things (“new heaven and new earth”), how could it fail to associate itself with the folk imagination of a different world and alternative order of things as expressed in folklore? In fact, Biblical projection of the future and Jesus’ own vision of the new — the apocalyptic — are not conceptual elaborations, but are expressed through the work of imagination. For Indian theology it would be difficult to think of eschatology without entering into the mine of Indian folk tales and stories and the alternatives they passionately advocate.

## V. Developing Contextual Categories

The development and direction of Indian theology<sup>21</sup> as true contextual theology will much depend upon the categories

20 Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell. Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*, University of Texas Press, Austin 1979, p. 14: cfr. ID., “The Utopian Function of Tradition”, in *Telos* No. 94 (1992–1993) pp. 25–29.

it employs and the language of experience from where they are formed. This applies to theology as much to sociology or cultural anthropology. Indian theology also therefore faces the general challenge like sociology or anthropology in India. In fact there can be a way of studying Indian experience (even when it is done by Indians themselves) through Western cognitive tools, and this is characteristic of so called "Orientalism."<sup>22</sup>

### Different cognitive tools

Unfortunately, the general mode of study of various fields of experiences in India has been (and still are) through cognitive categories and frames of interpretation imported from out, and they could be applied to any society. But experience, like language, is not simply a question of meaning and interpretation. It is truism to say that an experience cannot be conveyed and recorded in its full depth and intensity. For as in language, so too in experience there is a *texture* (as for example *rhyme* and *alliteration* in a local proverb) which cannot be rendered in another language even though its sense and meaning can be translated. The texture can be perceived only in the language of the people concerned and in their life-context, which is also the performance context. All this indicates the serious limitations of interpreting Indian experience through alien cognitive tools, and the imperative need to enter into cultural categories, divisions and classifications which people have developed in interpreting their own experience and which are intelligible only in the particular experience-context.

### From inculturated theology to contextual theology

In the light of the above, we can reflect on what it means for Indian theology to develop Indian categories and the contribution Indian folklore can make in this regard.

In the current theological vocabulary, the process of encounter between Christianity and Indian culture would be called 'inculturation'. As for theology is concerned, for many, inculturation means clothing a general theology with local cultural garments. But, I think we should distinguish between

21 Cfr. Felix Wilfred, *Beyond Settled Foundations. The Journey of Indian Theology*, University of Madras, Madras 1993.

22 Cfr. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Pantheon, New York, 1978.



an *inculturated theology* and a *contextual theology*. Inculturated theology is an attempt to endow it with indigenous qualities, whereas contextual theology is something which is not the local incarnation of a general theology, but a theology that cannot be transported elsewhere but is unique as it can be pursued and understood only within a particular frame of human and cultural experience with its characteristic texture.

For Indian theology to be contextual theology, besides relating itself to the experience of the people with its texture (to which I referred in the first part of this article), there is the need to be imbued with the categories and concepts the folk have developed in perceiving and interpreting themselves and their world. Here folklore offers theology the key to the world of contextual categories.

### Theology and mangala

Let us take for example, the distinction between myth and folktale. These are Western modes of classification. Here the point is to distinguish elements of a myth from those of a folk tale. Among the Indian village folk, one does not see things in this way. Among the Tamils, for example, there is the broad category of *akam* — things pertaining to familial life, to the inner world — and *puram*, pertaining to the public realm which concerns questions like politics, war, peace etc.<sup>23</sup> Stories are then seen not as distinguished between myths and folk tales (which is a Western classification), but as tales pertaining to *akam* or *puram*. The *akam* stories will have family life, love etc. as its motifs, different from *puram* type of tales. The *akam* will deal with folktales, whereas *puram* is the field of myths. That is why in India "there are no mother-in-law mythology; and there are no epic war nor the churning of the ocean in Indian folktales".<sup>24</sup>

Then we have *mangala* and *subha* (happy, blessed, auspicious) — categories so much part of the daily life of the folk. There is such richness in this concept which defies any proper translation. *Mangily* and *subha* have a sense of fullness, comprehensiveness. *Mangala* and *subha* indicate right time, right place, right agents and conjunction of divine and human forces.

23 Cfr. A. K. Ramanujan, "The Relevance of South Asian Folklore", *art. cit.* pp. 89ff.

24 Cfr. Ramanujan, *ibid.* p. 89.



There can be hardly a better term which can bring into a unique synthesis, the human, the worldly and the divine.

I have cited these as examples to show how Indian theology can become truly contextual by immersing itself in folklore and its experiential world; by learning folk language and categories for the understanding and contextual interpretation of Christianity. In this way, true inculturation, or more precisely contextualization, will be a hermeneutical process. I have dealt with this issue in detail elsewhere where I spoke of inculturation as a hermeneutical question and the need for an anthropologically and culturally founded ecclesiology.<sup>25</sup>

### Conclusion: some pastoral implications

A theologizing that is pursued by taking up seriously the challenge of folklore in its contextuality should help towards transformation of our pastoral praxis. There are many pastoral implications of this kind of theologizing. For want of space, let me conclude by proposing just a few:

1. Opting for the expressive forms of the folk — folklore — is to make a theological and pastoral option for the marginalized and oppressed in our society, specially the *dalits* and the *tribals* whose culture is oral and non-literary. Our excessive preoccupation with text and interpretation in various areas of our present pastoral praxis is a serious obstacle to this option. Our approach to Bible, catechetics, liturgy etc. would then need serious re-thinking in the light of what folklore has to say and the option it implies.

2. Folklore, whether in its oral form of transmission or in its modes of performance has a community as its base and environment. It is the language of the community, and in the process of transmission, communication, it creates and reinforces the community. In the light of it, we need to seriously re-think the unidirectional communication made prevalent at all levels in our present pastoral praxis. In this our pastoral praxis has much resemblance with modern sophisticated media of communication. Its flow is unidirectional, aggressive and catering to individual

25 Cfr. Felix Wilfred, *Sunset in the East? Asian Challenges and Christian Involvement*, University of Madras, Madras, 1991.

consumers, with total absence of any sense of community; rather it is geared to the destruction of community. Folklore presents us a different, more humanizing, community-building communication paradigm in the Church.

3. Our understanding and practice of inculturation will undergo a sea change if we take folklore seriously. First of all, we will be led to critically re-think the categories and symbols we adopt in this process which all derive from literary, text-centered upper caste culture. I do not mean only this. There is more to it. Secondly, steeped in the experience of the people, folklore leads us to a holistic vision and practice in which the physical and material base of our life is taken in all earnestness. There is no inculturation without being rooted in this folk experience finding its voice through their expressive forms — folklore.

4. The various pastoral agents in the Church — catechists, religious, clergy, Church leaders and others — should positively promote folklore and relate their pastoral praxis to what it has to offer. Promoting folklore will be a sign of their clear option for the marginalized and their language. This is required today all the more when these folk forms stand threatened. Threat to this language of the marginalized is not simply a threat to language; the threat is ultimately to the identity and self-hood of the oppressed themselves. The pastoral agents need to enter deeply into these folk forms which need to be promoted in the various formation centres meant to prepare pastoral agents. It is evident that all these presupposes on the part of pastoral agents a deep knowledge of the local language. Further, promoting collection and study of the folklore forms could be done through establishing local or regional centres meant for this purpose.

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